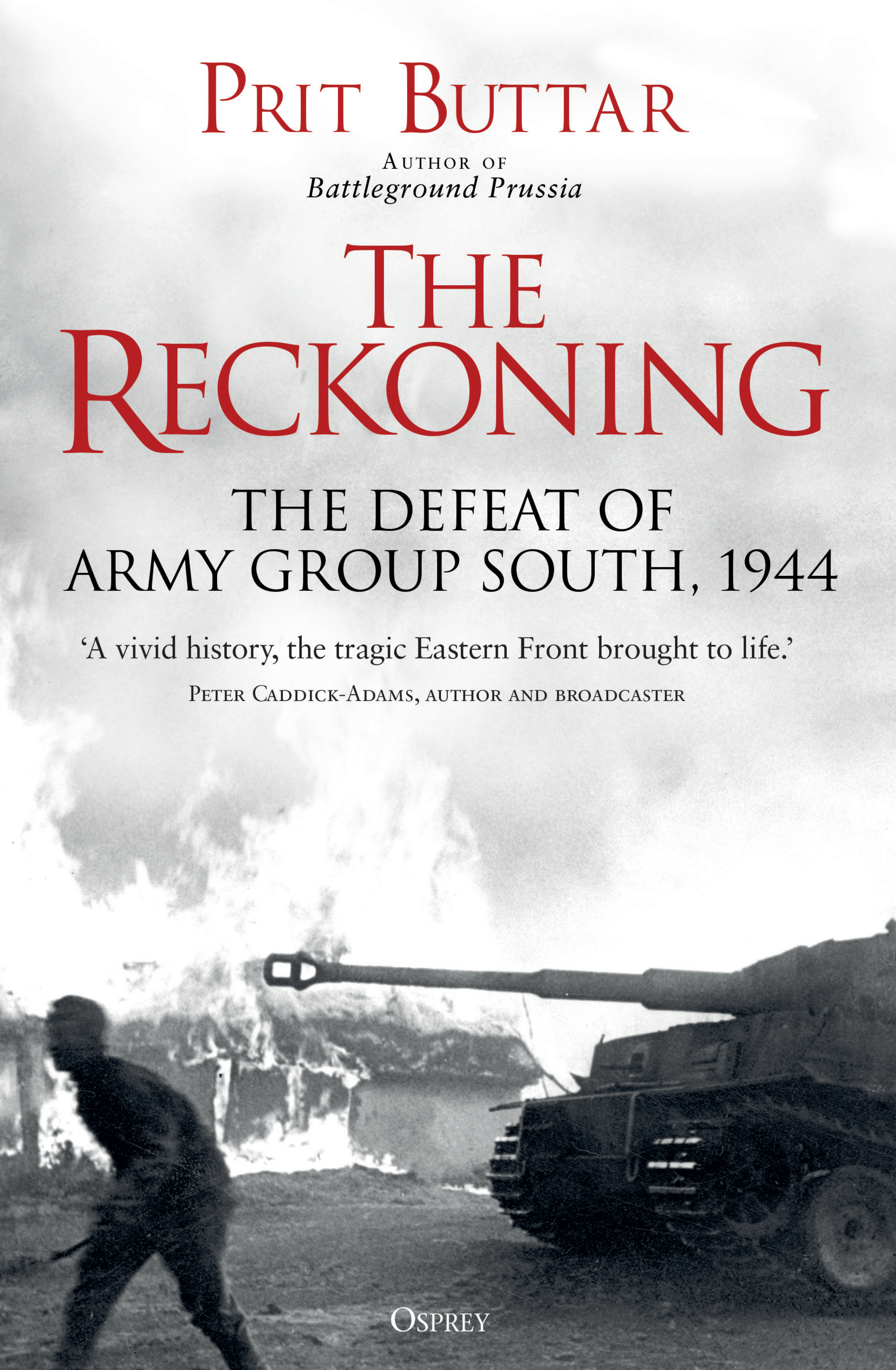

PRIT BUTTAR

AUTHOR OF
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THE RECKONING

THE DEFEAT OF ARMY GROUP SOUTH, 1944

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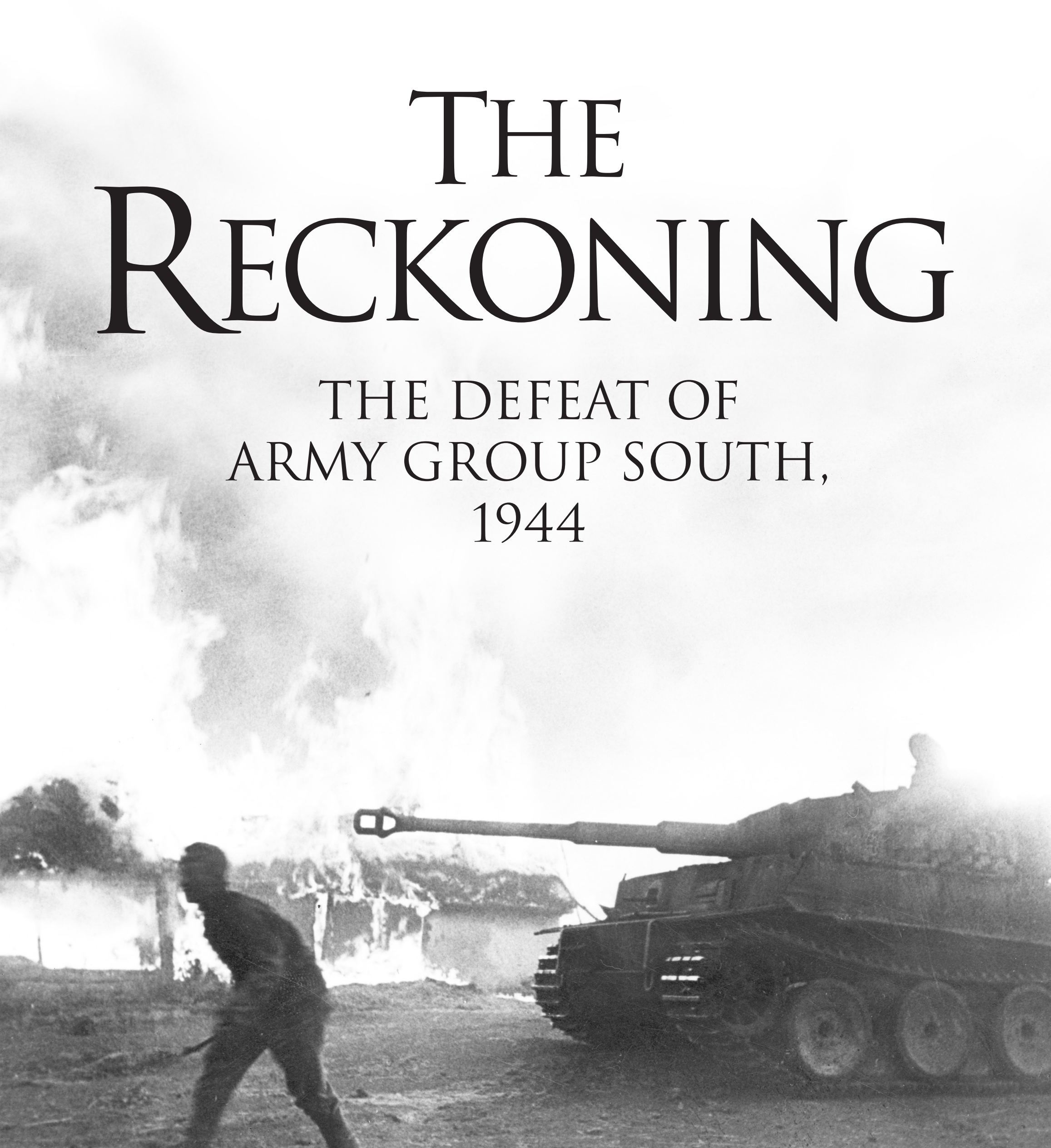

OSPREY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
Kemp House, Chawley Park, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9PH, UK
1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA
E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com
www.ospreypublishing.com

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

This electronic edition published in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2020

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB 978 1 4728 3791 2; PB 978 1 4728 3792 9; eBook 978 1 4728 3790 5;
ePDF 978 1 4728 3788 2; XML 978 1 4728 3789 9

Index by Zoe Ross
Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

Front cover photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images.

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CONTENTS

List of Maps 7

Dramatis Personae 8

Preface 14

Introduction 17

Chapter 1: The Protagonists 27

Chapter 2: The Kirovograd Encirclement 49

Chapter 3: *Watutin* and the Cherkassy-Korsun Encirclement 73

Chapter 4: Another Stalingrad 109

Chapter 5: Mud, Snow and Hill 239 139

Chapter 6: Kamanets-Podolski: The Encirclement of First Panzer Army 171

Chapter 7: Malinovsky's Offensive 211

Chapter 8: The Wandering Pocket 245

Chapter 9: The Crimean Peninsula 285

Chapter 10: The End of the Leash 331

Chapter 11: Preparing for Summer 369

Chapter 12: The Lviv-Sandomierz Operation 389

Chapter 13: The Disintegrating Axis 429

Chapter 14: The Approaching Endgame 451

Notes 469

Bibliography 483

Index 488

Plates 497

LIST OF MAPS

Southern Sector, Eastern Front, January 1944 28
Kirovograd Sector, 5 January 1944 54
Kirovograd Sector, 7 January 1944 64
Kirovograd Sector, 10 January 1944 68
Vinnitsa-Uman, 10–25 January 1944 78
The Korsun Salient, 24 January 1944 82
Konev's Attack, 24–28 January 1944 86
Vatutin's Attack, 24–28 January 1944 95
The Korsun Pocket, 1–8 February 1944 116
Operation *Wanda*, 4–5 February 1944 122
The Breakout, 11–17 February 1944 141
The Soviet Advance to the Dniester, March 1944 185
1st Ukrainian Front's Advance, March 1944 187
3rd Ukrainian Front's Advance, March 1944 214
The Advance to Odessa, March–April 1944 228
First Panzer Army's Breakout, April 1944 255
Kovel, March–April 1944 280
Crimea, Late 1943–April 1944 291
Iaşi-Kishinev Sector, 7 April 1944 335
Târgu Frumos, 9–12 April 1944 338
Kishinev-Tiraspol, 12–25 April 1944 342
Târgu Frumos, 25 April 1944 349
Kishinev-Tashlyk, 10–20 May 1944 355
Iaşi, 30 May–3 June 1944 364
Lviv Sector, 12 July 1944 393
Lviv Sector, 14–17 July 1944 401
Lviv Sector, 18–20 July 1944 408
Konev's Advance, July–August 1944 416
Southern Sector, August 1944 438

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

GERMANY

Allmendinger, Karl – commander V Corps, later commander Seventeenth Army
Angelis, Maximilian de – commander Sixth Army, replaced by Fretter-Pico
Back, Hans-Ulrich – commander 16th Panzer Division
Bäke, Franz – commander eponymous panzer regiment
Balck, Hermann – commander XLVIII Panzer Corps
Bayerlein, Fritz von – commander 3rd Panzer Division, replaced by Lang
Betz, Paul – fortress commander, Sevastopol
Breith, Hermann – commander III Panzer Corps
Brese-Winiary, Heinz von – battlegroup commander, 14th Panzer Division
Brinkmann, Helmuth – commander *Kriegsmarine* forces in the Black Sea
Bucher, Wolfgang – commander *Korps Abteilung B* battlegroup
Büsing, Otto – panzer regiment commander, *Grossdeutschland*
Busse, Theodor – chief of staff, Army Group South
Cramer, Gerhard – panzergrenadier officer, 1st Panzer Division
Debus, Heinrich – commander reconnaissance battalion, *SS-Wiking*
Degrelle, Leon – commander *SS-Wallonien*
Dorr, Hans – commander *SS-Germania*
Drekmann, Paul – commander *Korps Abteilung A*
Edelsheim, Maximilian Freiherr von – commander 24th Panzer Division
Einem, Hans-Egon von – commander 21st Panzergrenadier Regiment (24th Panzer Division)
Frank, Heinz-Werner – commander 1st Panzer Regiment (1st Panzer Division)
Fretter-Pico, Maximilian – commander Sixth Army
Friessner, Johannes – commander Army Group South Ukraine
Gehlen, Reinhard – head of *Fremde Heere Ost*

Gille, Herbert – commander *SS-Wiking*
Glässgen, Heinz – Panther battalion commander, 26th Panzer Regiment
Gollnick, Hans – commander XLVI Panzer Corps
Graeser, Fritz-Hubert – commander XXIV Panzer Corps, later commander XLVIII Panzer Corps
Harpe, Josef – commander Fourth Panzer Army
Hauffe, Arthur – commander XIII Corps
Hell, Ernst-Eberhard – commander VII Corps
Hollidt, Karl-Adolf – commander Sixth Army, replaced by de Angelis
Horn, Heinrich – commander 72nd Infantry Division
Hörnlein, Walter – commander *Grossdeutschland* Division
Hube, Hans-Valentin – commander First Panzer Army
Jaenecke, Edwin – commander Seventeenth Army, replaced by Allmendinger
Kästner, Robert – commander 72nd Infantry Division battlegroup
Kirchner, Friedrich – commander LVII Panzer Corps
Kleist, Ewald von – commander Army Group A
Knobelsdorff, Otto von – commander XL Panzer Corps, later eponymous *Armee Abteilung*
Koll, Richard – commander 1st Panzer Division, replaced by Marcks
Köller, Hans – battlegroup commander, *SS-Wiking*
Kruse, Kurt – commander 389th Infantry Division
Lammerding, Heinz – commander *SS-Das Reich*
Lang, Rudolf – commander 3rd Panzer Division
Langkeit, Willi – battlegroup commander, 14th Panzer Division
Lex, Alfred – battlegroup commander, *SS-Das Reich*
Lieb, Theodor – commander *Korps Abteilung B*
Lüttwitz, Smilo Freiherr von – commander XLVI Panzer Corps
Manstein, Erich von – commander Army Group South
Manteuffel, Günther von – commander 16th Panzergrenadier Division
Manteuffel, Hasso von – commander 7th Panzer Division, replaced by Schulz, then Mauss; later commander *Grossdeutschland*
Marcks, Werner – commander 1st Panzer Division
Mattenklott, Franz – commander XLII Corps
Mauss, Karl – commander 7th Panzer Division
Mieth, Friedrich – commander IV Corps
Mummert, Werner – battlegroup commander, 14th Panzer Division
Neindorff, Egon von – Tarnopol garrison commander, replaced by Schönfeld
Nicolussi-Leck, Karl – battlegroup commander, *SS-Wiking*

Ohlendorf, Otto – commander *Einsatzgruppe D*
Raus, Erhard – commander Fourth Panzer Army (replaced by Harpe), then First Panzer Army, then Third Panzer Army
Recknagel, Hermann – commander XLII Corps
Sansdig, Rudolf – commander *LSSAH* battlegroup
Saucken, Dietrich von – commander III Panzer Corps, later XXXIX Panzer Corps
Schönfeld, Carl-August von – Tarnopol garrison commander
Schörner, Ferdinand – commander Army Group South Ukraine, succeeded by Friessner
Schulz, Adalbert – commander 7th Panzer Division, replaced by Mauss
Schwerin, Gerhard Graf von – commander 16th Panzergrenadier Division, replaced by Manteuffel, G
Sixt, Friedrich – commander 50th Infantry Division
Speer, Albert – armaments minister
Speidel, Hans – chief of staff, Eighth Army
Stemmermann, Wilhelm – commander XI Corps
Tippelskirch, Kurt von – commander Fourth Army
Tresckow, Henning von – chief of staff, Army Group Centre and anti-Hitler conspirator
Unrein, Martin – commander 14th Panzer Division
Vormann, Nikolaus von – commander XLVII Panzer Corps
Wagener, Carl – chief of staff, First Panzer Army
Waldenfels, Rudolf Freiherr von – commander 6th Panzer Division
Wenck, Walter – chief of staff, First Panzer Army, succeeded by Wagener
Wietersheim, Wend von – commander 11th Panzer Division
Wöhler, Otto – commander Eighth Army
Zeitzler, Kurt – Chief of the General Staff

SOVIET UNION

Alekseev, Vasily Mikhailovich – commander V Guards Tank Corps
Baranov, Viktor Kirillovich – commander 1st Horse and Mechanised Group, 1st Ukrainian Front
Bogdanov, Semen Ilyich – commander Second Tank Army
Chuikov, Vasily Ivanovich – commander Eighth Guards (formerly Sixty-Second) Army

Eremenko, Andrei Ivanovich – *Stavka* representative in the Caucasus, then commander Coastal Army, replaced by Melnik
Gagen, Nikolai Aleksandrovich – commander Fifty-Seventh Army
Galitsky, Ivan Pavlovich – head of engineering troops, 1st Ukrainian Front
Grechkin, Aleksei Aleksandrovich – commander Twenty-Eighth Army
Grechko, Andrei Antonovich – commander First Guards Army
Katukov, Mikhail Efimovich – commander First Tank Army
Konev, Ivan Stepanovich – commander 2nd Ukrainian Front
Koroteyev, Konstantin Apolinovich – commander Fifty-Seventh Army
Koshevoi, Petr Kirillovich – commander LXIII Rifle Corps
Kravchenko, Andrei Grigorovich – commander Sixth Tank Army
Kreizer, Iakov Grigorevich – commander Fifty-First Army
Lashchenko, Petr Nikolaevich – commander 322nd Rifle Division
Lelyushenko, Dmitri Danilovich – commander Fourth Tank Army
Loza, Dmitri Fedorovich – Red Army tank crewman
Makovchuk, Nikolai Matveevich – commander XXXIV Guards Rifle Corps
Malinovsky, Rodion Yakovlevich – commander 3rd Ukrainian Front
Melnik, Kondrat Semenovich – commander Coastal Army
Monyushko, Evgenii Dmitrievich – artillery officer, Red Army
Moskalenko, Kirill Semenovich – commander Thirty-Eighth Army
Oktyabrsky, Filipp Sergeyevich – commander Black Sea Fleet
Otroschenkov, Sergei Andreevich – Red Army tank crewman
Papish, Mark Abramovich – Red Army infantryman
Petrov, Ivan Efimovich – commander North Caucasus Front, then Fifty-Sixth Army, renamed Coastal Army, replaced by Eremenko
Pliev, Issa Aleksandrovich – commander Horse and Mechanised Group, 3rd Ukrainian Front
Polozkov, Vasily Iudovich – commander XVIII Tank Corps
Proshin, Ivan Ivanovich – commander 155th Tank Brigade
Pushkin, Efim Grigorevich – commander XXIII Tank Corps, replaced by Vainrub
Reinhardt, Alfred – commander 98th Infantry Division
Rokossovsky, Konstantin Konstantinovich – commander 1st Belarusian Front
Rotmistrov, Pavel Alexeyevich – commander Fifth Guards Tank Army
Russkikh, Grigory Antonovich – Red Army infantryman
Rybalko, Pavel Semenovich – commander Third Guards Tank Army
Ryzhov, Alexander Ivanovich – commander Fourth Guards Army, replaced by Smirnov

Selivanov, Aleksei Gordeevich – commander V Guards Cavalry Corps
Semenov, Aleksei Ivanovich – commander XXXIII Rifle Corps
Shtemenko, Sergei Matveyevich – head of Operations Directorate, *Stavka*
Shumilov, Mikhail Stepanovich – commander Seventh Guards Army
Smirnov, Ilya Kornilovich – commander Fourth Guards Army
Sokolov, Sergei Vladimirovich – commander 2nd Horse and Mechanised Group, 1st Ukrainian Front
Sukhovorov, Mikhail Ivanovich – commander LXIII Rifle Corps battlegroup
Tanaschishin, Trofim Ivanovich – commander IV Guards Mechanised Corps, replaced by Zhdanov
Tolbukhin, Fedor Ivanovich – commander 4th Ukrainian Front
Trofimenko, Sergei Georgevich – commander Twenty-Seventh Army
Tsvetayev, Viacheslav Dmitrievich – commander Fifth Shock Army
Tutarinov, Ivan Vasilevich – commander 9th Cavalry Division
Vainrub, Matvei Grigorevich – commander Eight Army armoured forces, then commander XXIII Tank Corps
Vasilevsky, Alexander Mikhailovich – Chief of General Staff
Vatutin, Nikolai Fyodorovich – commander 1st Ukrainian Front
Vladimirsky, Lev Anatolevich – commander Black Sea Fleet, replaced by Oktyabrsky
Zaitsev, Vasily Ivanovich – brigade commander, Fourth Tank Army
Zakharov, Boris Petrovich – Red Army tank platoon commander
Zdanovich, Gavriil Stanislavovich – commander 203rd Rifle Division
Zhadov, Alexei Semenovich – commander Fifth Guards Army
Zhdanov, Vladimir Ivanovich – commander IV Guards Mechanised Corps
Zhmachenko, Filipp Feodosevich – commander Fortieth Army
Zhukov, Georgi Konstantinovich – Deputy Commander in Chief, Soviet Armed Forces

OTHERS

Antonescu, Ion (Romania) – premier, Romania, replaced by Sănătescu
Bandera, Stepan Andrijowycz (Ukraine) – head of OUN-B
Dumitrescu, Petre (Romania) – commander Romanian Third Army
Filipkowski, Władysław (Poland) – commander Polish forces, Lviv
Horthy, Miklós (Hungary) – premier, Hungary
Kállay, Miklós (Hungary) – prime minister, Hungary

Klyachkivsky, Dmytro (Ukraine) – UPA commander
Korne, Radu (Romania) – commander Romanian 1st Armoured Division
Melnyk, Andriy Atanasovich (Ukraine) – head of OUN-N
Michael (Romania) – king of Romania
Sănătescu, Constantin (Romania) – head of state
Schwab, Hugo (Romania) – commander Mountain Corps

PREFACE

Long before dawn on a cold winter's day in February 1944, a group of ten soldiers set off on a desperate march. The operation on which they were embarking had been given a dramatic name, but everyone had no doubt about what was at stake. If Operation *Freedom* failed, they could expect nothing but death. They were members of the *Waffen-SS*, and by early 1944, there were no illusions about being taken prisoner. There was far too much bad blood between their branch of the German military and the vengeful soldiers of the Red Army.

It was bitterly cold. Other men were moving towards the west ahead of them, seeking to link up with the relief column that had come to a halt tantalisingly close to the encirclement, but fresh snow fell from time to time, often erasing the tracks of those who had passed earlier. Behind them and on either side, they could see other groups, similar to their own, with little attempt to coordinate movements. This wasn't a carefully planned and executed operation – it was little more than a final desperate attempt to escape.

Stumbling upon an ambulance, this small group of desperate men followed it along a narrow road. The distance they would have to cover wasn't great, and the men began to calculate how far they must have come. Another two or three hours and they would be safe. Just as hopes began to rise, firing commenced to their right, followed by more shots straight ahead. Shells exploded somewhere ahead, their flashes briefly lighting up the landscape. Slowly, light began to leach into the eastern horizon as a new day dawned. The fire from the waiting Soviet troops grew steadily heavier, forcing the men to take cover. An armoured vehicle appeared from somewhere behind them and at first they accompanied it, until they realised that it was drawing heavy fire. As the sky grew lighter, the SS soldiers realised that they were moving in a narrow corridor perhaps as little as 800m wide, with lines of Soviet guns on either flank. They hurried on as fast as they could, but others – as a result of exhaustion, or wounds, or despair – had given up:

> For the moment we are following a little footpath, more a track left by other feet. There, 20–30m in front of us a man is sitting on a little hillock, a haversack

> between his legs, which are a little apart. When we get to him I see that he is a major of the Wehrmacht, a man [who looks to be] 60, but maybe in fact no more than 50 … I am surprised a bit as we pass him to see that he has a pistol in his hand, but we greet him with a nod of the head and continue on our way. We have not gone 20 paces when we hear a shot behind us. I turn immediately and I see the major, who does not seem to have stirred, he simply seems to be shifting his balance a little, from one side to the other. As I continue on my way I see him suddenly fall and slide off his improvised seat.[1]

The group continued, under almost constant fire. A group of Soviet tanks blocked their way until other soldiers, armed with Panzerfaust anti-tank weapons, managed to work their way close enough to destroy three and drive off the rest. Hungry and struggling with the cold, Fernand Kaisergruber, one of the SS soldiers, was separated from the others and lost consciousness for a time. When he awoke, he saw a terrible sight. A Soviet tank was just a stone's throw away:

> It has chosen several bodies, lying on the ground, perhaps still moving, as its target. It squashes them and pivots on them to be quite certain of achieving its goal. I see clearly the face of a man who was not dead and whose trunk disappears under the tank track. His face becomes all red as if ready to explode, as if the blood was going to come out through the pores! When the tank pivots again, I see a sleeve torn from the uniform stuck between two links of the track and turning with them, the arm in the sleeve, and the hand at the end. I see this arm make several complete rounds with the track, hitting the armour each time just above the track … The tank moves on and I see two more, a bit further off, venting their fury on the wounded, lying in the snow, disarmed, defenceless, left to their mercy …
>
> Once more I have got away, but how many more times can I do so?[2]

The ordeal of these soldiers from *SS-Wallonien* was one that would be repeated many times on the Eastern Front in 1944. Just three years before, many of them had marched through the same region heading east in what must have seemed like an irresistible advance. This war – a conflict different from any that preceded it, Hitler had announced, a *Rassenkrieg* ('war between races') that would decide which of two incompatible systems would triumph – had turned irrevocably against Germany. The conflict was still largely being fought on territory gained by the Wehrmacht in the triumphant days of 1941, but the tide of conflict was moving steadily to the west. Vengeance for the many acts of destruction and murder committed by the Germans and their allies during their time in Soviet territory was a dominant theme for the soldiers of the Red Army; whilst few German formations were completely innocent of war crimes, the SS were singled out by their enemies as deserving no mercy. Throughout 1944, many soldiers would ask themselves the same question that Kaisergruber asked himself as he attempted to escape from the Cherkassy encirclement: how many times could they, and the battered units they formed, continue to escape from their enemies? A final reckoning seemed to come closer every day.

INTRODUCTION

It is a widely held point of view that history is usually written – or at least distorted – by the victors. The general view of the war on the Eastern Front that developed in the western world in the decades after the conflict is almost unique in that it does not conform to this belief.

In the years that followed the end of the Second World War, western interest inevitably focused on the campaigns and battles in which British and American soldiers fought and died. There was a steady stream of accounts of the fighting in North Africa and Italy, Normandy and Asia; as time went by, the encounters in which the Western Allies had come off second-best, such as Belgium and France in 1940, were also covered. Whilst many of these accounts attempted to reinterpret those defeats as preludes to a greater victory, many writers also focused on the skill and power of the German forces. It was the beginning of the creation of the legendary Wehrmacht, a formidable opponent that was – at first – superior to all in its path. The ultimate victory of the Western Allies was therefore all the more impressive.

During the 1950s, the first English-language accounts of the Eastern Front began to appear. By this time, the political landscape had changed dramatically from the early 1940s. The Soviet Union, a former ally, was now the opponent of the West in the Cold War, and the former enemy, Germany, was beginning the process of rearmament to help oppose the new foe beyond the Iron Curtain. Many of the German officers who had served on the Eastern Front were now emerging from imprisonment – some of those held in the Soviet Union were not released until 1955 – and their memoirs sought to portray the war with three particular distortions. Firstly, the German officer corps was generally infallibly correct in its decision-making, and German failures were largely due to the interference of Adolf Hitler; secondly, the German armed forces were almost universally superior to the Red Army, but were overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers; and thirdly, war crimes were not committed by ordinary combatants – rather, they were attributed to various Nazi bodies operating in the rear zones. Even the formations of the *Waffen-SS* were portrayed in this manner – the divisions that fought in the east were elite formations fighting to protect Europe from Bolshevism, not at all related to other parts of the SS that were responsible for the Holocaust and the concentration camps.

Soviet accounts of the Eastern Front faced a number of difficulties in being accepted by the western world. The most obvious barrier was language, and there was usually a greater delay between publication of Soviet memoirs and their translation into English than was the case with German memoirs. Most of the Soviet leaders in the closing years of the war went on to hold military posts after the end of the fighting, and their memoirs didn't appear until they finally retired – as a result, many of their former opponents had already published their accounts, and these had been accepted by western readers as a generally accurate version of events. And, just like the German accounts, those written by Soviet officers were also distorted. Whilst the memoirs of German officers followed the themes outlined above, those of Soviet wartime commanders were subject to a far more rigorous requirement to conform to Soviet Cold War dogma. Consequently, they contain frequent passages singing the praises of the Soviet state, and the heroism of individuals is usually portrayed in the context of self-sacrifice for the Communist ideal. Furthermore, politics in the Soviet Union after the war required those who aspired to high office to demonstrate impeccable credentials earned in the Great Patriotic War. It is perhaps ironic that the history of the battle on the Eastern Front that was most strongly influenced by Soviet accounts was the German attempt to crush the Kursk salient in 1943, and greater access to Soviet archives has highlighted that the widely accepted view of this as the greatest tank battle in history in which the striking power of the panzer divisions was dealt an irreparable blow is a considerable distortion of reality.

In short, a cynical definition of memoirs is that, like autobiographies, they are an account of the life of a hero by someone who knows him well. This harsh judgement, with an overlying layer of a need to conform to an orthodox point of view, applies to varying degrees to almost all of the accounts written by the men who commanded divisions and armies on both sides of the Eastern Front.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been greater access to Soviet-era information, particularly contemporary data that was hidden from western sources for decades. Writers like David Glantz have mined this data and this has led to a gradual re-evaluation of the war, but the legacy of books written during the Cold War still persists. This account seeks to address some of the persistent myths of the war, particularly the apparent infallibility of German military commanders, the near-invincibility of the Wehrmacht, the denial of any involvement (or often even knowledge) of the crimes committed in the occupied territories by German forces, and the view of the Red Army as a huge, unskilled horde that rolled over everything in its path. Like all myths, these contain many truths, but also a great many distortions.

The year 1943 saw what was probably the biggest annual change in the outlook of the Second World War. Although the year had begun with the Axis forces in Ukraine facing catastrophic defeat, a highly effective counterstroke by the Wehrmacht transformed the situation on the battlefield. As the spring thaw enforced a pause in major operations on the Eastern Front, the two sides rearmed their depleted formations and prepared for what they believed would be a decisive battle in the summer. These preparations took place in an atmosphere of cautious optimism both in Germany and the Soviet Union, but in reality the tide had already turned decisively against Germany.

Aided by a steady flow of high-quality intelligence about German preparations, both from the 'Lucy' spy network and the burgeoning partisan groups operating behind German lines, Stalin and his army commanders oversaw the preparation of formidable defensive lines around the Kursk salient, which was to be the target of the next German offensive.[1] The Red Army's plan was to draw the Germans into a battle of attrition to reduce their efficacy before launching an offensive of its own. For much of the pre-battle phase, Stalin was concerned whether the much-feared German panzer formations could be halted by the Soviet defences, but his commanders had few doubts. Although Erich von Manstein's counterstroke in March 1943 had been a chastening setback, the German blow had fallen on degraded Soviet units operating at the end of long supply lines. Stopping the Germans with a series of carefully designed defences, manned by units at full strength, would be an entirely different matter.

As preparations for *Zitadelle* – the German codename for the attack on the Kursk salient – dragged on, resulting in repeated delays in the German start date for the operation, many in the German hierarchy expressed serious concerns about the clear strength of Soviet defences, and the wisdom of risking the panzer divisions – many of which were still significantly below full strength – in an attack on an objective of little or no strategic value. Heinz Guderian, who had been a leading figure in the development of the panzer arm and was currently serving as Inspector-General of Armoured Forces, attempted to persuade Hitler of the futility of *Zitadelle* and suggested in late May that there was no necessity for any major offensive in the east. Hitler replied that he had grave misgivings about the attack, and as discussions continued, Guderian added:

> How many people do you think even know where Kursk is? It's a matter of profound indifference to the world whether we hold Kursk or not.'[2]

Despite apparently agreeing with Guderian – at least, according to Guderian's memoirs – Hitler ordered preparations to continue. When the offensive finally took place, commencing on 5 July, the Germans fought their way into the depths of the Soviet defensive systems, but failed to achieve a decisive breakthrough. Despite inflicting heavier losses on the Red Army than they sustained themselves, the German army groups were forced to abandon their attempts after just 12 days. British and American forces had landed in Sicily and, fearing further landings in Italy or even in southern France, Hitler wanted to transfer forces to the west. Hoping that the Red Army had been sufficiently weakened to prevent an immediate resumption of hostilities, the Germans ceased their attacks.

Casualties in the Red Army had indeed been heavy. German losses in *Zitadelle* are estimated at about 58,000 men and between 250 and 320 tanks; by contrast, the Red Army lost nearly 178,000 men and between 1,600 and 1,900 tanks.[3] The difference was that despite these heavy losses, the Red Army still had substantial forces in reserve, and many of these were already in position to launch a Soviet summer offensive. The numbers of losses also hide an important factor that was increasingly a problem for the forces of the Third Reich. In addition to the tanks that were lost in battle, the Germans suffered a further 1,600 tanks and assault guns damaged or disabled through mechanical failures. Spare parts for these vehicles were increasingly difficult to find, and whilst some were rapidly repaired and returned to service, others would be unavailable for a prolonged period – and many would eventually be written off or lost during the retreats that followed. Conversely, the ability of the Red Army to recover and repair damaged tanks improved steadily throughout the war.

The growing shortage of spare parts was a sign of the fundamental pressures facing Germany, and these pressures dictated that – provided that Germany did not succeed in knocking one or more of its foes out of the war before the end of 1943 – the final result of the war was no longer in doubt. After a year of being involved in the war, the United States had completed mobilisation of its immense industrial resources for the war effort and was producing tanks, planes, ships and other war materiel in quantities that Germany could not hope to match. Soviet production had steadily increased through 1942 as factories that had been relocated east in 1941 resumed production, and these factories were also out-producing Germany. Fuel shortages had plagued the German armed forces since the beginning of the war, reflecting the very limited sources of crude oil available to Germany, and this problem was steadily growing worse, despite repeated attempts to ramp up the production of synthetic gasoline. Albert Speer, a former architect who had been appointed armaments minister in 1942, had streamlined production of German tanks, aircraft, guns and munitions, resulting in impressive improvements in output, but despite these achievements German armaments industries could not come close to matching the output of the nations arrayed against Germany. Despite constant bombing of German cities, armaments production would actually continue to increase in 1944, peaking during the year, but reserves of a variety of metals that were vital for the production of hardened steels, tungsten-tipped armour-piercing ammunition, and even brass for cartridges declined alarmingly. During 1943, Germany managed to produce 10,700 tanks and assault guns to replace battlefield losses of about 9,000, a remarkable achievement in the face of growing material shortages and constant bombing, but although the Soviet Union lost 22,400 tanks and assault guns in the bitter fighting on the Eastern Front, it produced a staggering 27,300 replacements, and in addition received nearly five million tons of military aid from Britain and the United States.[4] Perhaps more serious for the Wehrmacht was the constant loss of irreplaceable personnel. For much of the war, the superlative skills and training of soldiers at all levels had compensated for material deficiencies, both in terms of quantity and quality; the constant high loss rate ensured that this would be far harder to achieve in coming years. All that Germany's enemies needed to do in 1943 was avoid a catastrophic defeat. Attrition of Germany's limited resources would achieve the rest.

In the months before the Battle of Kursk, the Red Army planned extensively for a rapid transition to offensive operations after the German attack was halted. The first such offensive – codenamed *Kutuzov* – broke against the German Army Group Centre, north of the Kursk salient, almost immediately. Once again, losses amongst the Soviet forces were far greater than those suffered by the Germans, but the Wehrmacht was forced back along a broad front. Even as fighting in this sector died down, a second Soviet offensive – codenamed *Polkovodets Rumyantsev* – erupted on the southern side of the Kursk salient. In bitter fighting, the Red Army fought its way into Belgorod, Kharkov and Akhtyrka, and although it did not achieve a decisive breakthrough, most of the panzer divisions available to Manstein's Army Group South were drawn into costly combat.

In the first half of the war, German armoured formations were arguably superior to those that opposed them, largely due to high levels of training, efficiently organised intra-division logistic and engineering support, and the flexible doctrine under which they operated. This doctrine was an evolution of German military thinking dating back to the mid-19th century, with subordinate commanders being made aware of the overall intentions of their superiors and then being entrusted to innovate if their original plans proved to be impossible to execute, and close cooperation between infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft resulted in a series of stunning victories that took the Wehrmacht to within a few miles of Moscow in late 1941. These successes hid serious underlying problems. The infantry of the German Army, by contrast to the panzer arm, was far less impressive. Even by the end of 1944, infantry divisions were heavily dependent upon horse-drawn transport and although steps had been taken to improve their ability to resist armoured attacks, German infantry units repeatedly proved to have very limited capabilities in this increasingly important role. With almost every division below establishment strength, panzer divisions were increasingly needed to launch counterattacks in order to defeat Soviet armoured incursions, and the damage done to German armoured units in the fighting around Belgorod, Kharkov and Akhtyrka was the beginning of a process that would see the divisions end the year in a dangerously weakened state. Just as serious as their casualties was the steady loss of horses. Vehicles could be manufactured; horses of course took at least four years to develop sufficient musculature to be used to pull guns and wagons, and the growing shortage of horses made the infantry divisions even less mobile than before.

Manstein and other German commanders were disappointed by the failure of the Kursk fighting to lead to any lengthy delay in the next Soviet offensive, and the speed with which the Red Army regrouped and renewed its attacks after capturing Kharkov and Akhtyrka added to the growing gloom in German circles. With difficulty, Manstein managed to get Hitler to face reality and to authorise a withdrawal to the line of the Dnepr, and much of the second half of 1943 was spent with the Germans falling back from one ad hoc line to the next, trying to prevent the pursuing Soviet troops from sweeping past their exposed flanks. There was a constant fear that the Red Army would reach the Dnepr first, trapping large numbers of German troops east of the great river, but although Soviet spearheads reached – and in places crossed – the Dnepr during the autumn, the German withdrawal to the river was largely achieved without any major disasters. Again, the Red Army's losses far exceeded those of the Wehrmacht, but the panzer divisions were in almost constant action, and most reached the Dnepr with very few tanks still running.

The purpose of the withdrawal to the Dnepr was to stop the Red Army on a defensible line, but this intention had two essential requisites. Firstly, defensive positions needed to be prepared along the river, either before the German troops reached the intended line or by the troops themselves before the Red Army pushed forward. Secondly, Army Group South would need sufficient manpower to man the proposed line. In both respects, the Germans failed. Far too late, Hitler had authorised construction of defences along the Dnepr, but this meant that there was nowhere near enough time for the construction to be completed, even if resources had been available, and fortifications were constructed only in a few areas. The retreating German troops were closely pursued by the Red Army, and Soviet formations made several attempts to seize crossings before any German line could be built by the troops themselves. Some of these attempted crossings failed with heavy casualties, but others were successful. Nor was there sufficient manpower to defend the line of the Dnepr. Replacement drafts arrived in far too small numbers to keep up with losses, and the panzer divisions in particular suffered an alarming rate of decline. Many German soldiers and officers had kept going through the tough fighting of the withdrawal in the expectation that the Dnepr line would give them a welcome break, with well-constructed positions and good accommodation for the winter. The disappointment of finding few, if any, positions, and the closeness of the Soviet pursuit, had a crushing effect on morale.

Morale was also falling in German circles away from the front line. In Berlin, Albert Speer later wrote that Hitler was increasingly withdrawn and pessimistic:

> He suffered from spells of mental torpor and was permanently caustic and irritable. Earlier, he had made decisions with almost sportive ease; now, he had to force them out of his exhausted brain.[5]

The surreal world of Hitler's headquarters was increasingly filled with attempts to placate the Führer by playing down bad news. The importance of any German success was consistently overstated, and there was a general obsession with Soviet losses – surely, everyone argued, even the Soviet Union would eventually run out of resources and the Red Army would be bled white. Anyone who attempted to warn of the scale of the resources deployed against the Third Reich was subjected to scornful ridicule – after presenting such a report, General Georg Thomas, the head of the Defence Economy and Armament Office of *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* ('Armed Forces High Command', or *OKW*, responsible for the conduct of the war in all theatres other than the Eastern Front) was forbidden from carrying out any further studies in this area. Slowly, with considerable reluctance, some of the officers and other officials who had been slighted by Hitler, or who foresaw the near-inevitable destruction and devastation of Germany, began to think the hitherto unthinkable and drew up plans for overthrowing the regime.

The resources of the Reich were under immense strain, but despite the constant needs of the front line, Germany continued to expend considerable efforts on implementing the *Endlösung der Judenfrage* ('Final Solution to the Jewish Question'). The gas chambers that had been built in 1942 and 1943 had largely eliminated the Jewish population of Poland, and additional massacres such as the operation codenamed *Erntefest* ('Harvest Festival') followed in the camps of eastern Poland, partly triggered by fears that the Jewish workers imprisoned in these camps might attempt uprisings as the Red Army drew closer. Railway rolling stock was almost always in short supply on the Eastern Front, where it was used both to transport supplies and to help move units rapidly from one part of the front to another, particularly the panzer divisions; yet thousands of trains continued to transport Jews to the death camps from the occupied parts of Europe. Most of the Jews killed in the Soviet Union were massacred by SS units and locally raised paramilitary formations, and as the Soviet forces recaptured territory, they saw first-hand the scale of the killings carried out by the Germans and their helpers. In addition to killing over a million Jews in Ukraine, the Germans slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who were identified as communists, partisans, or were otherwise regarded as 'undesirable', and tens of thousands more were forcibly transported to Germany as forced labourers; many of them would never see their homes again. After two and a half years of heavy fighting, the soldiers of the Red Army had an abiding hatred of the foe that had brought so much destruction to their homeland, and this was now increasingly augmented by a growing desire for revenge, both against the Germans and those who had collaborated with them.

The issue of revenge raises another area of uncertainty with regard to memoirs. The accounts of both sides refer to atrocities committed by the enemy; by contrast, there is almost complete silence about any crimes carried out by 'friendly' forces. There can be little doubt that both the Red Army and the Wehrmacht often showed little regard for anything approaching rules of conduct during war, and this applied both to the treatment of soldiers and civilians. The manner in which both sides treated the conflict as one between incompatible political and ideological systems undoubtedly made such crimes more likely, and there are clues in the accounts written by the men who fought on the Eastern Front. Soviet accounts routinely refer to all Germans as Fascists or Nazis, and German writers are often indiscriminate in labelling their foes as Bolsheviks. This increased the tendency of both sides to depersonalise and dehumanise the enemy, which in turn made atrocities simpler to justify. The same applied to civilians. Even at this comparatively late stage of the war, the Germans still regarded Slavic populations as inferior, and almost all German officers showed little hesitation in using civilians as forced labourers, in a manner that they would not do on the Western Front. The Soviet leadership also treated the civilian population of the territories that it regained in an arbitrary manner. As will be described, men of military age were swiftly conscripted into the ranks of the depleted infantry units and thrown into combat after receiving only minimal training, and civilians were pressed into service as labourers. The generals described this as 'voluntary' and 'enthusiastic' support by the civilian population, and in many cases it probably was, but on most occasions it is likely that the civilians had little choice in the matter. Other ideological factors were also at play on the Soviet side. Any individuals who had collaborated with the Germans were likely to receive severe punishment, and if a significant proportion of a given population had collaborated, punishment was likely to be general, regardless of the level to which individuals had been involved.

By the time that Army Group South had completed its withdrawal to the Dnepr, the Red Army had secured sufficient bridgeheads to make a defensive line along the river untenable. Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, changed hands, and as the year drew to a close much of the river was in Soviet hands. As had occurred the previous winter, the Germans attempted to launch decisive counterattacks with fresh armoured units brought east from Italy and France, but despite initial successes near Zhitomir, these counterattacks did not make anything approaching the impact achieved in early 1943. Crucially, they failed to inflict sufficient damage on Soviet armoured units to prevent further attacks, and the soldiers in Ukraine looked forward to 1944 with contrasting feelings. On the German side, there was a mixture of resignation and realisation that the war could no longer be won, particularly amongst the officer corps, but many ordinary soldiers continued to show a remarkable degree of faith in Hitler, despite the clear evidence of their own suffering. The Red Army, by contrast, was full of optimism at all levels. It had complete control of the initiative, forcing the Germans to react to its moves, and its resources remained vast. At the beginning of 1943, the Red Army had hoped briefly in the wake of the encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad that a war-winning victory was within reach, only to have its hopes dashed; by contrast, although hopes were once more high at the beginning of 1944, there was far less prospect of the Germans being able to pull off a recovery.

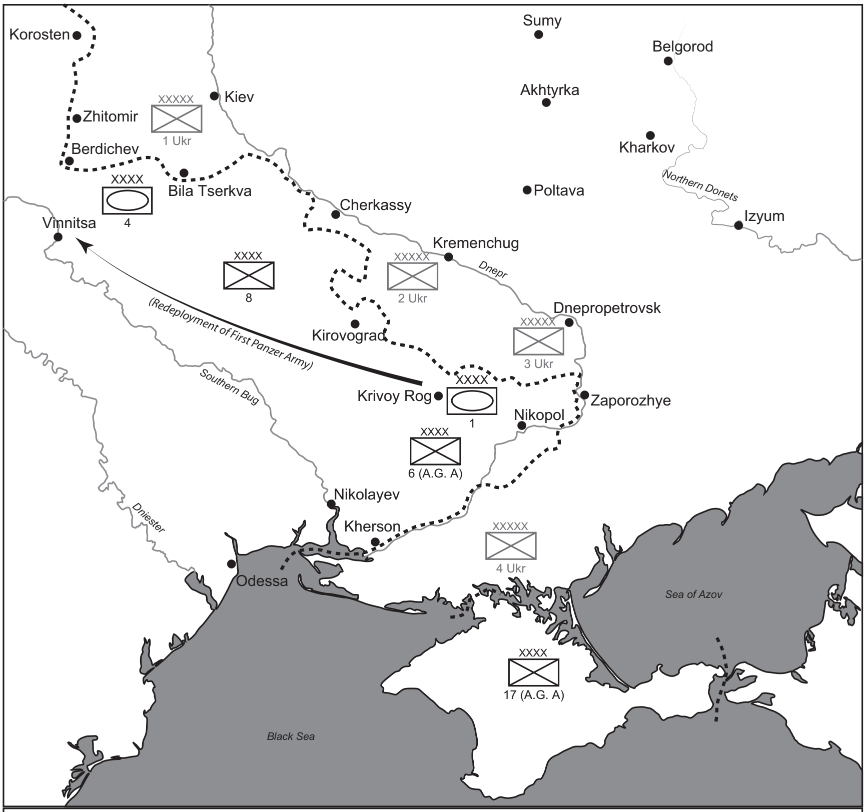
The year of 1944 would see almost every German army on the Eastern Front partially or totally encircled, something that the Red Army had vainly tried to achieve the previous year. To date, Manstein and other commanders had successfully prevented such catastrophes, but the mismatch between the two sides was now far greater. For the Red Army, complete destruction of the Fascist enemy and revenge for the damage inflicted upon the Soviet Union seemed ever closer. There may have been disappointments in 1943, but the Red Army's personnel had continued to learn and improve, and the coming year would see the completion of the development of Soviet military doctrine at almost every level. It was surely only a matter of time before the Red Army achieved complete success.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROTAGONISTS

The German forces in Ukraine were organised into two top-level commands. Most of the armies facing the Soviet forces were part of Army Group South, commanded by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein; Army Group A, commanding the German forces in Crimea and the coastal region of Ukraine immediately to the north, lay on Manstein's southern flank.

Manstein was widely regarded as the best operational mind in the German Army, but there were few contemporaries who regarded him as a close friend; many were intimidated by his ability to absorb huge amounts of detail without losing sight of the overall picture, and his often acerbic and impatient attitude alienated others. He had been sent to the region in haste during the critical days that followed the beginning of *Uranus*, the Soviet attack to surround Stalingrad, in November 1942. He took command of the newly created Army Group Don and oversaw the doomed attempt to reach the surrounded city, before dealing with a series of crises that erupted as the entire German position along the Don collapsed. His command was renamed Army Group South in early 1943, absorbing what remained of Army Group B, and with the help of substantial reinforcements from the west, together with skilful use of his armoured assets, he achieved a remarkable recovery in March 1943. In addition to coordinating his forces and juggling factors of time and distance, he had to fight a constant battle with Hitler to secure permission for operational withdrawals and reinforcements. The plan to attack the Kursk salient in the summer of 1943 was originally his suggestion, but his intention was to strike as soon as possible after the spring thaw had ended, before the Red Army had recovered from the mauling he had inflicted in March. When this option was delayed, his preference was to pull back towards the Dnepr, luring the Soviet


Korosten
Sumy
Belgorod
Kiev
XXXXX
1 Ukr
Zhitomir
Akhtyrka
Berdichev
Kharkov
XXXX
4
Bila Tserkva
Poltava
Northern Donets
Cherkassy
Izyum
Vinnitsa
Kremenchug
XXXX
8
XXXXX
2 Ukr
Dnepr
(Redeployment of First Panzer Army)
Dnepropetrovsk
Kirovograd
XXXXX
3 Ukr
Southern Bug
XXXX
1
Krivoy Rog
Zaporozhye
Nikopol
XXXX
6 (A.G. A)
Nikolayev
Dniester
Kherson
XXXXX
4 Ukr
Odessa
Sea of Azov
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17 (A.G. A)
Black Sea
N
0
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50km

Southern Sector, Eastern Front,
January 1944

forces into the central Ukraine before counterattacking from the northwest into their flank and rear, but Hitler was characteristically unwilling to authorise such a major withdrawal, even if the intention was to counterattack and recover most or all of the lost ground.

As the fighting of summer 1943 developed, Manstein faced a series of crises along his long front line, and his constant demands for either operational freedom or reinforcements – and frequently for both – resulted in a steady deterioration in his relationship with Hitler. For a professional staff officer like Manstein, it was nonsensical to justify the defence of regions purely for political or economic reasons – if sufficient forces weren't available, these regions simply couldn't be held. However, Manstein's logical rejection of Hitler's arguments for not conceding ground was not followed through to a conclusion. His demands for reinforcements sometimes led to modest forces being assigned to him (rarely in the numbers promised by Hitler), but his requests were frequently rejected on the grounds that reinforcements simply weren't available. Troops had to be retained in the west to defend against a possible landing by the British and Americans in France, and pressure upon German defences throughout the Eastern Front meant that there were no longer any 'quiet' sectors from which troops could be transferred to Ukraine. Although Hitler attempted to 'compartmentalise' the command of the army, with officers receiving little or no information about neighbouring formations, Manstein must have been aware that his requests for reinforcements from Army Groups Centre and North were impossible to fulfil, and that there were no longer large numbers of troops sitting idle across Western Europe. Given that this was the case, and that Hitler insisted that the mineral and other resources of Ukraine were vital for Germany to continue its war effort, the only logical conclusion was that the war could no longer be won and that it was vital to try to secure peace. But like so many German officers, Manstein refused to face the consequences of such a conclusion. If Hitler refused to seek a way out of a war that could no longer be won, continuing to serve him was to condemn Germany to widespread destruction. Whilst some were now prepared to put their oath of loyalty to Hitler to one side and were actively plotting to kill the Führer, the great majority of officers couldn't contemplate any such step.

A major problem for the Germans was the insistence of the Western Allies on Germany's total surrender. In the conference held in Casablanca in January 1943, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that the objective of the war was the unconditional surrender of the Axis Powers. There was no question of negotiating peace with Hitler. Many later concluded that this announcement was counterproductive in that it left Manstein and other senior officers with little option other than to continue the war, especially as they lacked the political knowledge, contacts or experience to contemplate whether such harsh terms would also apply should Hitler be removed from office.[1] In late November 1943, the anti-Hitler conspirators made an approach to Manstein – by no means their first – to try to win him over. General Henning von Tresckow, who had recently been appointed as chief of staff in Second Army, part of Army Group Centre, visited Manstein's headquarters and told Manstein that Hitler was obdurate and not open to reason. In such circumstances, Germany was doomed unless the military, who Tresckow said had it in their power to stop him, took appropriate steps.[2] Manstein reportedly dismissed any such argument. Later, while in captivity after the war, he wrote:

> [My staff and I] were convinced, despite Hitler's defective command, that we would succeed in breaking the offensive power of the Russians forward of the Reich's borders … A *coup d'état* with the murder of Hitler would in any event lead to defeat … Continuing the fight under his command could still have led to a draw.[3]

Regardless of his oath of loyalty, it is clear from Manstein's memoirs that by the end of 1943, he had a low opinion of Hitler. There is little doubt that just a year before, Hitler had been in considerable awe of Manstein. This was no longer the case. As a series of crises developed and worsened in the great Dnepr bend in late December 1943, Manstein advised *Oberkommando des Heeres* ('Army High Command' or *OKH*, the body with overall control of the Eastern Front) that in order to restore the situation he intended to launch an operation similar to that of the previous winter. First Panzer Army would be pulled out of its position at the right of Army Group South and transferred north, abandoning the Dnepr bend and thus releasing up to 12 divisions through a radical shortening of the front line. Once it was extracted, it would be used in a powerful counterattack to defeat the Soviet tank armies. When he received no response to his proposal, Manstein issued orders for the move to commence, aware that Hitler would simply refuse to reply and thus avoid making a decision he disliked. Unknown to Manstein, Hitler was deeply disparaging about the proposed plan, telling his entourage:

> He [Manstein] should not speak of a 'counter operation', but call it by the right name: running away … The fact that some of his troops are very demoralised is related to the spirit that they absorb from above.
>
> … No other front sector has received as much as Field Marshal von Manstein has received, although his ratio of forces is not worse than anywhere else. It's because of his frame of mind that not only is there no positive mood but there's a totally negative mood coming from his headquarters.[4]

There was some truth in Hitler's assertion. Manstein had been given substantial reinforcements, but it was also true that he faced the great bulk of the Red Army's tank forces. The fundamental problem that caused the growing rift between Hitler and Manstein was a disagreement on how to continue the war. Manstein still hoped for success by mobile operations; Hitler wished to go over to obdurate defence until the expected invasion of Western Europe had been repulsed. In late 1943, *Führerbefehl 51* appeared, making this explicit:

> For the last two and a half years, the bitter and costly struggle against Bolshevism has made the utmost demands upon the bulk of our military resources and energies. This commitment was in keeping with the seriousness of the danger and the overall situation. The situation has since changed. The threat from the east remains, but an even greater danger looms in the west: the Anglo-American invasion. In the east, the vastness of the space will, as a last resort, permit the loss of territory even on a major scale without suffering a mortal blow to Germany's chance of survival.
>
> Not so in the west! If the enemy here succeeds in penetrating our defences on a wide front, consequences of overwhelming proportions will follow within a short time …
>
> For that reason, I can no longer justify the further weakening of the west in favour of other theatres of war.[5]

Until the expected invasion in the west had been defeated, the Eastern Front was expected and required to defend against Soviet attacks with the resources it already had.

Early in January 1944, the two men met for further discussions. There remained a substantial gap between the northern flank of Fourth Panzer Army and the southern elements of Army Group Centre, covered by a fragile screen, and if the Red Army were to exploit this, it might realise Manstein's abiding fear that his army group would be driven away to the south. Manstein outlined his plans for a limited counterattack, but stressed that this was only a temporary solution, and went on to make arguments that were almost identical to those he had made on previous occasions. In the absence of major reinforcements, he had no choice but to abandon Nikopol and the Crimean peninsula in order to release sufficient forces to shore up the northern wing of the army group. Furthermore, he told Hitler that he regarded a withdrawal from the eastern parts of the Dnepr bend as purely the first step of an essential redeployment. Without substantial reserves behind the front line, there would be a continuing threat of a Soviet breakthrough, and the troops required to create these reserves could only be released if the front line was shortened significantly, pulling back to a line on the Southern Bug. Despite the clarity of this argument, Manstein cannot have been surprised by Hitler's refusal to consider any such withdrawal, on the basis of familiar arguments about the essential nature of

Nikopol's manganese mines and the importance of holding Crimea to prevent changes of heart in the Balkan nations and in Turkey. Nor was there any prospect of releasing troops from elsewhere – Army Group North could only do so by sacrificing so much ground that the continuation of Finland as a German ally would be jeopardised, as would control of the Baltic Sea, which was vital for the training of U-boat crews. Troops could only be released from the west after an Anglo-American invasion of the mainland had been crushed. Once the Red Army had finally ground to a halt through exhaustion, Hitler suggested, a counterattack could be launched to restore contact with the forces trapped in Crimea. Finally, Manstein had a brief conversation with the Führer in private to suggest (not for the first time) his personal solution to the crisis on the Eastern Front. As there were no other witnesses, we have only his account of what was said:

> 'One thing we must be clear about, *mein Führer*,' I began, 'is that the extremely critical situation we are now in cannot be put down to the enemy's superiority alone, great though it is. It is also due to the way in which we are led.'
>
> As I spoke these words, Hitler's expression hardened. He stared at me with a look which made me feel he wished to crush my will to continue. I cannot remember a human gaze ever conveying such willpower. In his otherwise coarse face, the eyes were probably the only attractive and certainly the most expressive feature, and now they were boring into me as if to force me to my knees … I realised that those eyes must have intimidated many a man before me. I still went on talking, however, and told Hitler that things simply could not go on under the present type of leadership. I must, I said, revert to the proposal I had made to him twice already. To handle grand strategy he needed one thoroughly responsible chief of staff on whose advice alone he must rely in all matters of military policy. The logical effect of this arrangement on the Eastern Front must be – as was already the case in Italy and the west – the appointment of a commander-in-chief enjoying full independence within the framework of grand strategy.
>
> As had happened on the previous two occasions when I had approached Hitler about the need for a radical change in his handling of military affairs (amounting in practice, if not formally, to his relinquishment of command), he reacted entirely negatively, asserting that he alone could decide what forces were available for the various theatres of war and what policies should be pursued there. In any case, he said, Göring would never submit to another man's orders.
>
> As regards the proposed appointment of a commander-in-chief for the Eastern theatre of war, I have already quoted Hitler's retort that no other man would have the same authority as he had. 'Even I cannot get the field marshals to

> obey me!' he cried. 'Do you imagine, for example, that they would obey you any more readily? If it comes to the worst, I can dismiss them. No one else would have the authority to do that.'
>
> When I replied that *my* orders were always carried out, he made no further comment and brought the meeting to a close.[6]

The arguments about the essential nature of the Nikopol mines extended beyond the constant bickering between Manstein and Hitler, and the dispute sheds an interesting light on Hitler's thinking and the manner in which he attempted to manipulate information for his own purposes. Several weeks before this latest argument, General Kurt Zeitzler, the chief of staff at *OKH*, had contacted Speer to seek the help of the armaments minister. Zeitzler explained that Hitler was quoting Speer in his arguments over Nikopol, stating that without the manganese from the mines, Speer had warned that steel production would cease within three months. After meeting experts from the steel industry, Speer sent a message to Hitler and Zeitzler that he had good news: the Reich's manganese reserves were sufficient for about 11 months, and if alternative alloys were used where such substitutions could be made, these reserves could be stretched out for 18 months. To Speer's surprise, this news did not have the effect that he had expected:

> When I arrived at the Führer's headquarters two days later, Hitler snarled at me in a tone he had never used toward me before: 'What was the idea of your giving the chief of staff your memorandum on the manganese situation?'
>
> I had expected to find him well pleased with me, and managed only to reply, stunned: 'But, *mein Führer*, it's good news after all!'
>
> Hitler did not accept that. 'You are not to give the chief of staff any memoranda at all! If you have some information, kindly send it to me. You've put me in an intolerable situation. I have just given orders for all available forces to be concentrated for the defence of Nikopol. At last I have a reason to force the army group to fight! And then Zeitzler comes along with your memo. It makes me out a liar! If Nikopol is lost now, it's your fault! I forbid you once and for all' – his voice rose to a scream at the end – 'to pass memoranda to anybody but myself. Do you understand that? I forbid it!'[7]

The implication was clear: Hitler believed that Manstein lacked the resolve to stand and fight, and in response the Führer was using economic arguments largely as a means of forcing Army Group South to stop retreating. In this context, there was no possibility of Hitler accepting Manstein's requests for further retreats.

Manstein must have been aware that his time as commander of Army Group South was probably coming to an end, but for the moment he continued to wrestle with the problems his command faced. The northern flank of Army Group South consisted of Fourth Panzer Army under the command of General Erhard Raus, who had distinguished himself with division and corps commands the previous year. His predecessor as commander of Fourth Panzer Army, Hermann Hoth, had been dismissed by Hitler for showing too much pessimism; Hoth had not made any significant military errors, and his pessimism had been based upon an accurate assessment of the problems that his command faced, but Hitler was increasingly strident about the need for a greater sense of determination and willpower amongst his commanders. Given that he faced identical problems as his predecessor, it was highly likely that Raus too would fall foul of Hitler sooner or later. Manstein's constant concern about his army group being outflanked to the north and then being driven south against the shores of the Sea of Azov or the Black Sea where it would be destroyed in isolation persisted throughout the second half of 1943. For much of the year, Fourth Panzer Army's northern flank had little or no contact with the German Second Army to the north – the most southern element of Army Group Centre – and in the opinion of almost every commander in the region, it would take both considerable reinforcements and a degree of mobility and freedom to restore the situation. The reinforcements were, as already described, rarely forthcoming in sufficient numbers, and Hitler's reluctance to countenance withdrawals greatly restricted the ability of Fourth Panzer Army to protect its open northern flank.

The forces immediately south of Fourth Panzer Army were undergoing radical redeployment. In an attempt to concentrate forces for his counterstroke to blunt the Soviet advances, Manstein had transferred First Panzer Army from the Dnepr bend to the west, inserting it into line on Fourth Panzer Army's southern flank. It was led by General Hans-Valentin Hube, who had lost an arm in the First World War but had remained on active service, fighting in the *Freikorps* immediately after the war. Like Raus, he had led divisions and corps with skill and energy and was one of a relatively small number of officers withdrawn from the Stalingrad encirclement. He then commanded the German forces in Sicily at the time of the Allied invasion in 1943 before conducting a skilled withdrawal to the Etna Line around Messina, successfully pulling back most of his command to safety in Italy. Already popular with Hitler (not least because of his open support of the Führer), his determined fighting against the American and British forces together with his successful evacuation of Sicily raised his profile still further, and he returned to the Eastern Front in October 1943 to take command of First Panzer Army, replacing General Eberhard von Mackensen, who like Hoth had fallen out of favour with Hitler. Manstein valued Hube's aggressive style of leadership and the manner in which Hube had earned the respect of his troops by sharing their hardships during combat, but even during the fighting near Stalingrad in early 1943 he had been concerned by Hube's willingness to believe Hitler's assurances:

> It was remarkable how Hube's stay in Lötzen [when Hube visited Hitler's headquarters] had impressed him and to what extent he had been influenced by Hitler's display of confidence – genuine or otherwise …
>
> General Hube, who was a fearless man, had tried to bring home to Hitler how damaging such events as the encirclement of Sixth Army must be to his prestige as head of state. By this means he wished to suggest that Hitler should hand over command – at least on the Eastern Front – to a soldier. … Hitler doubtless supposed that Hube's *demarche* had been inspired by me. This was in fact not the case.[8]

Next in Army Group South's line was Eighth Army, formed during the fighting near Kharkov the previous summer from an ad hoc army-sized group of units. Its commander, General Otto Wöhler, had been in post from when the army was formed and had shown considerable skill during the withdrawal to and across the Dnepr. He had served as Manstein's chief of staff when Manstein commanded Eleventh Army in Crimea and the two men had a strong, mutually trusting relationship. When Wöhler took command of Eighth Army, Manstein could not hide his satisfaction:

> Wöhler's cautiousness and *sang-froid*, which had stood up to such severe tests in Crimea, would be of particular value in the present situation.[9]

Wöhler's army was in an unenviable position. In December 1943, Soviet forces had renewed their attacks from the large bridgehead that they held around Kiev and had advanced to capture Bila Tserkva; as will be described below, a further attack from the Dnepr by Soviet forces further downstream towards Kirovograd – now the Ukrainian city of Kropyvnytskyi – would leave a significant part of Wöhler's army in an exposed salient, with its tip on the Dnepr near Kanev. Having spent the second half of 1943 driving the Germans back on a broad front across Ukraine, the Red Army was bound to view this salient as a tempting target for an encirclement that might inflict far more severe damage on the Wehrmacht than constantly pushing the Germans back towards the west.

On the southern flank of Army Group South was Army Group A, which in its current incarnation was created in July 1942, when Hitler divided Army Group South into Army Groups A and B. Its commander when it was created was Field Marshal Wilhelm von List, who was removed from office after expressing serious doubts about how the campaign in the Caucasus was unfolding. For a period of time, the army group came under the direct command of *OKH*, and as the Soviet encirclement of Stalingrad unfolded Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, commander of First Panzer Army at the time, was appointed to command. Kleist was an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime and a devout royalist, and had been sacked from command of *Wehrkreis* ('Military District') *VIII* in 1938 when he joined other officers in protesting at the dismissals of General Werner von Blomberg and General Werner von Fritsch, the commander-in-chief of the army, but he was reinstated in 1939. He commanded a motorised corps in the invasion of Poland and had overall command of an eponymous armoured group that advanced through the Ardennes and struck towards the English Channel in May 1940. This command then became *Panzergruppe 1*, and Kleist led it in the invasions of Yugoslavia and Greece before the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. His *Panzergruppe* was involved in tough fighting near the frontier against powerful Soviet armoured formations, but after overcoming them Kleist led his men forward in a rapid advance, forming the southern pincer of the Kiev encirclement and then driving on to capture Rostov – briefly – late in the year. Renamed First Panzer Army, this formation continued to be commanded by Kleist into 1942 and he showed considerable skill in helping defeat the Soviet offensives of early 1942 before driving over the Don and towards the Caucasus. Whilst Manstein may have wished him to show more alacrity in withdrawing Army Group A from the Caucasus in early 1943, the reality was that Hitler repeatedly procrastinated about issuing clear orders to this effect, and in any event fuel shortages and railway capacity prevented any such rapid retreat. Instead, Kleist's troops conducted an efficient fighting withdrawal, much to the frustration of Stalin, who was deeply critical of the dilatory pursuit by the opposing Soviet forces. Of Kleist's two armies in the Caucasus, one – First Panzer Army – withdrew across the Don and passed into Manstein's command, and the other – Seventeenth Army – pulled back into the Taman peninsula, where it repeatedly beat off every attempt by the Red Army to destroy it. In the second half of 1943, Seventeenth Army – now commanded by Generaloberst Edwin Jaenecke – was given permission to pull back across the Kerch strait into Crimea, where it became isolated after Soviet forces broke through German lines and reached the Black Sea coast around the Dnepr estuary. Dependent upon supplies brought in by air and sea, the survival of Seventeenth Army would ultimately rest on whether it was possible for the Germans to re-establish land contact. This in turn would require German forces to remain in strength in the Dnepr bend, which Manstein had already decided was impossible, but – perhaps because in 1942 he had led Eleventh Army to conquer the Crimean peninsula – he found it difficult at first to recommend abandonment of the peninsula. In any event, Hitler was firmly set against any such evacuation. If the Soviet Union recovered Crimea, he said repeatedly, the political impact on the Balkans and Turkey would be deeply damaging, and Soviet bombers would be able to reach the Romanian oilfields.

The German Sixth Army, deployed to the south of Wöhler's Eighth Army, was from time to time under the command of either Army Group South or Army Group A. Generaloberst Karl-Adolf Hollidt, a diffident but highly capable officer, had commanded Sixth Army since it was re-formed in mid-1943, and he now held the lower Dnepr, including the Nikopol bridgehead. At the start of the year, his army was once more part of Army Group South, but would be reassigned to Army Group A after just a few weeks.

The rank and file of the Wehrmacht was generally in poor shape at the beginning of 1944. The infantry divisions in particular were all far from establishment strength and their weakness in anti-tank weaponry had been fully exposed in the previous year. Partly to address this latter problem, the *Panzerfaust* and *Panzerschreck* hand-held anti-tank weapons were entering service, but the amount of front line that each division had to defend despite their low numerical strength remained a major issue. Repeatedly in 1943, German infantry had succeeded in stopping the first Soviet attack on their lines, but in doing so exhausted their very limited reserves of men and ammunition. Subsequent Soviet attacks almost always forced a withdrawal unless panzer divisions were available to mount counterattacks, and the mismatch in strength between the Red Army and the Wehrmacht meant that as soon as the panzer divisions were tied down in one sector, the Red Army promptly created a crisis elsewhere on the front. The view of an officer of 57th Infantry Division was shared by most German soldiers:

> The division's fighting strength has been weakened by fighting over several months against an enemy who has numerical and material superiority. The infantry battalions are at only 20–40 per cent strength. Combat morale has sunk. There is

> apathy and indifference in the unit. The troops have been living in conditions in which the most basic essentials of life are lacking.[10]

Life in the armoured formations wasn't much better. Reports from officers of 8th Panzer Division in late 1943 painted a similarly bleak picture:

> After continuous operations of heavy fighting since the beginning of this month, the state of the troops has fallen so low that they can make no further major efforts. During the rearguard actions from Kiev to Zhitomir, the troops in the main had to withdraw on foot in the worst road and weather conditions … in their current state, the troops cannot cope with a march of even a short distance …
>
> Almost all the panzergrenadiers have foot problems. These are mainly due to overexertions of the joints, muscles and ligaments resulting in swelling …
>
> In addition, due to the universal infestation with lice … there are numerous infections from scratching skin. These are often a consequence of the contamination of other skin conditions …
>
> About 80 per cent of the combat strength are suffering from illnesses related to the cold. These include respiratory infections, rheumatic complaints, stomach and intestinal disorders, with many having severe diarrhoea, as well as bladder infections resulting in frequent incontinence …
>
> In summary, it is necessary to report that from a medical perspective that no marching or related combat can be expected of the panzergrenadiers now or in the near future.[11]

Some reports mentioned growing disillusionment with the high command, but despite the evidence of their own experiences, most soldiers seem to have remained loyal to Hitler and discipline remained strong. Many of the panzer divisions were far below their establishment strength because they had sent a panzer battalion – half of their tank strength – back to Germany to be re-equipped with new Panther tanks, and these units could look forward to a welcome boost in strength in the coming year when these battalions returned. But this expectation was almost certainly tempered by growing awareness in the army that despite its powerful gun and impressive frontal armour, the Panther was plagued with reliability issues, and most units that had received Panthers had suffered more losses from breakdowns than from enemy action.

There were also gripes about other weapons. Late in 1943, Speer made a trip to Lapland in order to escape the poisonous atmosphere of Hitler's inner circle and to assess the value of mineral resources in the region, and took the opportunity to meet soldiers near the front line. It was a chastening experience as well as an informative one:

> A unit demonstrated to me the effect of one of our 150mm infantry howitzers on a Soviet dugout. It was the first 'test firing' with live ammunition I had really witnessed … the gunners scored a direct hit and the wooden beams of the Russian dugout flew into the air. Immediately afterward a lance corporal right beside me collapsed without a sound. A Soviet sharpshooter had hit him in the head through the observation slit … I had been acquainted with our infantry howitzers purely as technical items to be demonstrated on a shooting range; now I suddenly saw how this instrument which I had regarded purely theoretically, was used to destroy human beings.
>
> During this inspection tour both our soldiers and officers complained about our lack of light infantry weapons. They particularly missed an effective submachine-gun. The soldiers made do with captured Soviet weapons of this type.
>
> Hitler was directly responsible for this situation. The former First World War infantryman still clung to his familiar carbine. In the summer of 1942 he decided against a submachine-gun that had already been developed and ruled that the rifle better served the needs of the infantry. One lingering effect of his own experience in the trenches was, as I now saw in practice, that he promoted the heavy weapons and tanks he had then admired, to the neglect of infantry weapons.[12]

Development of new infantry weapons had been a complex and often chaotic business with competing interests resulting in waste and delay. By mid-1943, there were proposals to replace the standard infantry rifle with a new semi-automatic weapon but these were abandoned when this gun – at that stage, known as the MKb ('*Maschinenkarabiner*', or 'machine-rifle') 42 – was shown to be too inaccurate to be used as a sniper's rifle and could not fire rifle grenades; this was the occasion described by Speer when Hitler intervened. The project was kept alive by redesignating the gun the MP43 ('*Maschinenpistole*', or 'machine-pistol'), but again Hitler stopped development when he became aware of it. He was then persuaded to allow further work for evaluation purposes; it is worth mentioning that Hitler's reluctance was probably based more upon the difficulties of switching ammunition production to a new type than any nostalgia for his experiences in the First World War. The continuing tests demonstrated the efficacy of the gun and it finally went into mass production, eventually being given the designation StG44 ('*Sturmgewehr*' or 'assault rifle').

When the troops received the new guns, they were enthusiastic about them, but they appeared only slowly. By contrast, the Red Army had plentiful supplies of automatic weapons like the PPSh41 (‘*Pistolet-Pulemyot Shpagina*’ or ‘Shpagin machine-pistol’), and many units were equipped entirely with them. Its effective range was far inferior to a conventional rifle, but it gave Soviet troops considerable firepower in the sort of close-quarter combat that was widespread on the Eastern Front.

Opposing the German forces in Ukraine were several Fronts of the Red Army. A year before, a Soviet Front would have been estimated to have the approximate strength of a German army, a Soviet army would have been roughly the same strength as a German corps, and a Soviet corps would have been roughly the equal of a German division. Given the greater tactical expertise of the German formations, they would have expected to prevail over their Red Army equivalents in a battle of equal numbers. By the beginning of 1944, this was generally no longer the case. In each of these comparisons, the advantage was with the Soviet side for a variety of reasons. The numerical weakness of German units has already been described, and although many Red Army units were also badly degraded, they received replacement drafts in larger numbers than Wehrmacht formations. Many of these drafts were poorly trained and German reports show that the Red Army often resorted to ‘human wave’ attacks as the men lacked the skill for more elaborate tactics, but numerically, Soviet units – particularly the critical tank formations – were usually closer to their establishment than German formations. Furthermore, the Red Army took active steps to compensate for numerical shortfalls by increasing the provision of artillery. The quality of Soviet equipment had also improved steadily through the war, and most tanks were now equipped with radios, allowing better coordination during fighting. Again, replacement tank crews were often poorly trained, but even poorly trained replacements were better than no replacements.

In order to coordinate forces at the level of several Fronts, Stalin had adopted the practice of sending representatives of *Stavka* (the Soviet military high command) to the front line. These were usually either Marshal Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov or Marshal Alexander Mikhailovich Vasilevsky. Zhukov is perhaps the better known of the two, and is often credited with many of the successes of the Red Army in the first two years of the war with Germany. He oversaw the defence of Leningrad and Moscow in late 1941 and then played a leading part in the planning of *Uranus*, the operation that resulted in the encirclement of Stalingrad, but Vasilevsky, a quieter figure, was also instrumental in the latter operation. Thereafter, the two men worked side by side, with

Vasilevsky often coordinating the forces in the southern Ukraine while Zhukov concentrated on those to the north.

Zhukov was an uncompromising figure who demanded complete obedience from his subordinates. After the war, some of these officers suggested that Zhukov had exaggerated his role in the war, and opinion varied between regarding him as the man without whom the Soviet Union might have lost the war to a brutal soldier who sacrificed men in huge quantities with little or no compunction.[13] He repeatedly insisted on renewing attacks that had already failed, for example during Operation *Mars*, the attempts to destroy the German-held Rzhev salient to the west of Moscow in 1942, but he had Stalin's trust and soldiers in the Red Army regarded his presence as synonymous with success. Vasilevsky was a very different figure, with some considering him as too passive in his relationship with Stalin, but his organisational capability was unquestioned.

During the preceding year, the Soviet Fronts operating in Ukraine had been renamed. The most northern was 1st Ukrainian Front to the west of Kiev, commanded by General Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin. As a relatively young man – he was born in 1901 – he was too young to serve in the First World War but joined the Red Army in 1920 and rose steadily, particularly during Stalin's purges of the army in the 1930s. Despite his relative lack of combat experience, he was a favourite of Stalin due to his energy, peasant background and impeccable Communist Party credentials. He was chief of staff of Northwest Front at the beginning of the war with Germany and his enthusiasm for attack brought him into direct action against Manstein who at that time was commander of a German motorised corps; the heavy losses he inflicted on the German units caused confusion and dismay but Vatutin then overreached himself and the units he had thrown forward suffered catastrophic losses. It was a characteristic that recurred in operations that followed. In 1942, Vatutin coordinated the Red Army units defending Voronezh, repeatedly throwing tank and infantry units at the Germans. Some of these counterattacks enjoyed modest success, while others resulted in wasteful casualties. Towards the end of the year, he was appointed commander of Southwest Front and launched a devastating attack on the Italian Eighth Army, overwhelming the poorly equipped Italian troops and penetrating to the Tatsinskaya airfield, one of the key points of departure for planes taking part in the airlift to the encircled Sixth Army in Stalingrad. As the German front line became increasingly disordered, Vatutin's armies turned west and penetrated into the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Manstein's counterstroke tore apart Vatutin's overextended formations and then proceeded north to inflict further damage on the Soviet armies around Kharkov, and many of the other senior commanders later wrote in their memoirs that Vatutin was primarily responsible for the disaster that overtook the Red Army:

> To this day it remains a riddle how Vatutin, who certainly had considerable powers of circumspection and always paid due attention to reconnaissance, should on this occasion have been so long in appreciating the danger that had arisen in the path of his front. The only explanation seems to have been his utter conviction that the enemy was no longer capable of marshalling his forces for decisive battle.[14]

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Vatutin did not survive to take up high office after the war and to write his memoirs, and to an extent he was a convenient scapegoat for others. Vasilevsky was, characteristically, rather more balanced in his assessment of the failure to achieve more after the Stalingrad encirclement:

> The commanders of Southwest and Voronezh Fronts incorrectly assessed the strategic situation that had taken shape by mid-February … They looked upon the regrouping of enemy forces that had begun on about 10 February … as the beginning of an enemy withdrawal of his Donbas grouping beyond the Dnepr. Basing himself on this wrong evaluation, Vatutin … asked permission of *Stavka* to use all the forces of his front to make a sudden offensive so as to destroy the enemy completely between the Donets and the Dnepr and to reach the latter before the spring thaw set in.
>
> … On 17 February, after the liberation of Kharkov, Stalin personally informed Vatutin by telephone that the new plan of operation … had been confirmed … Thus both *Stavka* and the General Staff had made the same mistake as the commanders of Southwest and Voronezh Fronts: they did not expect the enemy offensive operations because they thought him already beaten.[15]

Despite criticism for his part in the setback, Vatutin's personal standing with Stalin ensured that he was not punished for this mishap. He was transferred to the command of Voronezh Front and took part in the fighting in the Kursk salient before launching his armies across the central Ukraine towards the Dnepr. When Vatutin's troops secured bridgeheads across the great river, Zhukov characteristically insisted that the tired divisions – now part of the renamed 1st Ukrainian Front – should continue their attacks towards Kiev from the Bukrin bridgehead to the southeast of the city, even though two such attacks had already failed with heavy losses and a decision had already been made to transfer

1st Ukrainian Front's main effort to another bridgehead north of Kiev – on this occasion, Vatutin was criticised for failing to show sufficient energy and aggression. A thick-set man with a large head and powerful shoulders, often referred to by his subordinates as 'the man with no neck', he was a hard-driving commander but was popular with his men, spending a great deal of time visiting forward units and sharing the hardships of ordinary soldiers.

To the southeast of Vatutin's troops was 2nd Ukrainian Front, commanded by General Ivan Stepanovich Konev. At the start of the war, he commanded the Soviet Nineteenth Army in Ukraine before taking command of Western Front. His forces were encircled and destroyed near Vyazma in October 1941 and Stalin threatened severe punishment, but Zhukov managed to persuade the Soviet leader of Konev's value; he redeemed himself with his resolute defence of Moscow in the fighting at the end of the year. He commanded troops on the southern flank of the Kursk salient with great skill, making extensive use of camouflage to deceive the Germans about his true strength, and then threw his armies forward in the assault that recaptured Belgorod and Kharkov. Like Vatutin, he succeeded in securing bridgeheads over the Dnepr in the early autumn of 1943, and then launched a series of costly attacks in an attempt to exploit his gains. Finally, he secured permission from Stalin in late November to adopt a defensive stance while his troops recovered from their exertions. Konev was a different personality from Vatutin, regarded as a ruthless man who showed little hesitation in punishing subordinates who did not follow his instructions or did not achieve their allocated goals. Conversely, he was also far more likely than Vatutin to spend time in careful preparation and planning rather than improvising as a campaign unfolded. Unlike Vatutin, he also showed greater 'political awareness' – perhaps his narrow escape from punishment in 1941 left him acutely aware of the importance of retaining Stalin's approval.

The Soviet armies that had penetrated into the Dnepr bend were controlled by General Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky's 3rd Ukrainian Front. As a corps commander, he conducted a skilful withdrawal along the Black Sea coast in 1941 and then took command of the Soviet Sixth Army. He mounted successful attacks to retake parts of the Donbas region in the first winter of the war and then took command of Southern Front. His armies were badly defeated in the Soviet attempts to capture Kharkov in May 1942 and Stalin was suspicious that Malinovsky had deliberately allowed the Germans to defeat his forces. These suspicions appear to be based upon Malinovsky's time as a sergeant in the Russian Legion, a Russian force that was sent to France in 1916, and the Soviet leader seems to have considered that Malinovsky had been persuaded by westerners he had met in France to undermine the Soviet war effort against Germany. The likelihood that a mere sergeant would have made any contacts that might later lead to treachery was very remote, and Stalin's suspicion is a good example of his level of paranoia. After a short period away from the front line, Malinovsky was given command of the new and inexperienced Sixty-Sixth Army to the north of Stalingrad; with this command he launched energetic attacks against the German forces, making little progress but tying down several German units. He commanded Second Guards Army in the fighting against the German attempts to lift the siege of Stalingrad and in February 1943 he was once more assigned to command Southern Front. A month later, he was transferred to Southwest Front, which was later renamed 3rd Ukrainian Front. Like other Soviet units, his armies pursued the Germans as they fell back to and across the Dnepr, securing crossings and forcing the Germans to abandon their bridgehead on the east bank of the river at Zaporozhye, and then advancing swiftly to capture the important city of Dnepropetrovsk (now the Ukrainian city of Dnipro). By this stage of the war, Stalin had put aside his doubts and urged Malinovsky to drive on to eliminate the German forces still in the Dnepr bend, but the Soviet armies were close to exhaustion and badly depleted by months of near-continuous fighting. With the autumn mud adding to their problems, they were forced to halt to rest and recover.

The most southern command of the Red Army in Ukraine was 4th Ukrainian Front, led by General Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin. Despite serving as an officer in the tsar's army in the First World War, he rose rapidly in the Red Army. He commanded an army with distinction in the fighting around Stalingrad before taking command of Southern Front when Malinovsky was transferred to Southwest Front in March 1943. His natural reticence meant that he had a lower profile than other ambitious officers, but he was widely respected both by his equals and his subordinates. He had a reputation for careful planning, and unlike many senior Soviet commanders he does appear to have tried repeatedly to keep his losses to a minimum.

Such a concern for casualties was badly needed throughout the Soviet armed forces. The losses suffered by the Red Army in the war to date were immense. Since June 1941, some nineteen million personnel had been killed, wounded or taken prisoner.[16] These figures do not take into account those who were wounded, returned to service, and were wounded again, so the total number of men and women affected would have been smaller. Despite such terrible casualties, the performance of the army steadily improved, for several reasons. Firstly, the Red Army proved to be far more able than the Wehrmacht to analyse its successes and failures and to alter its unit structures accordingly. Secondly, the obsolescent tank fleet with which it had started the war was largely gone, replaced mainly by the excellent T-34 medium tank; during 1943, the advent of German Panther and Tiger tanks made the T-34 less effective, and work began on designing an entirely new tank, intended to replace both the T-34 and the heavy KV-1. Adoption of this new vehicle – named the T-43 – would have resulted in a marked reduction in tank production in the short term and despite having thicker armour, it was judged to be no improvement on the T-34 when it came to combat with the Tiger tank. It was also markedly less mobile, and instead it was decided to modify the T-34, replacing its 76mm gun with a more powerful 85mm weapon. This came at a price – the new tank could carry less ammunition than the older model and its larger turret, though better protected, was an easier target for German gunners – and even with the new gun, it was unable to deal with Tigers on equal terms at long range, but it was nevertheless an improvement on its predecessor. Mass production would begin in February 1944, and at the beginning of the year most units were still equipped with 76mm-gunned T-34s and a mixture of tanks provided by the British and Americans. Most of these 'lend-lease' tanks were regarded as inferior by the Red Army, but they increased the armoured strength of the Soviet forces substantially.

Tank losses in the Red Army were consistently significantly greater than in the Wehrmacht. In 1943, Soviet forces lost 22,400 tanks and assault guns, compared by about 9,000 German vehicles.[17] However, bare statistics of losses do not tell the whole story. Firstly, much of the year saw the Germans retreating, meaning that the Red Army could recover many of its knocked-out tanks and repair them. Secondly, German armoured units that recovered damaged vehicles did not usually count these as having been 'lost', and instead recorded them as vehicles that might be returned to front-line service after repair. The shortage of spare parts meant that many of these were ultimately written off or stripped down to provide parts for other vehicles, but did not appear in the numbers of tanks officially lost in combat. In any event, Soviet tank production continued to dwarf German output, even after Speer's impressive improvements in efficiency. As a result, the mismatch between the armoured resources of the two armies was far greater at the beginning of 1944 than it had been a year before.

The mood of the men of the Red Army was markedly different from that of the personnel of the Wehrmacht. The great victory at Stalingrad might have been followed by a German recovery before the spring thaw in 1943, but success in the Battle of Kursk followed by the advance across central Ukraine had ended forever the aura of German invincibility. The core of experienced, battle-hardened veterans might have dwindled in the face of terrible casualties, but there were still sufficient 'old soldiers' to ensure that younger recruits received plenty of advice on how to survive on the battlefield. Nevertheless, many advancing units were forced to draft large numbers of men from the newly liberated territories into their ranks with little or no training, in addition to the relatively poorly trained replacement drafts from the Soviet interior, and the relative lack of military skill and experience in these men contributed to the continuing stream of heavy casualties. But as they advanced, the men of the Red Army found plentiful evidence of the manner in which the Germans had treated the citizens of Ukraine, and this hardened their attitude towards the hated Fascists. Everywhere, civilians told the Soviet soldiers about mass killings, food requisitions that had left Ukrainians to starve in huge numbers, and forcible deportations of workers to the factories of the Reich. The anger and desire for revenge provided strong motivation, regardless of the losses they had suffered.

But not all Ukrainians welcomed the return of the Red Army. There had been widespread distrust of the Communists in Ukraine before the war, particularly in the rural areas where millions died in the famines of the 1930s, which had been deliberately worsened by Moscow. Consequently, the Germans were welcomed in many parts of Ukraine as liberators and many Ukrainians chose to serve the Germans in a variety of roles. As was the case in the Baltic States, many local men were enrolled into paramilitary formations that were then used to round up and kill Jews, Communists and other groups labelled by the Germans as 'undesirable'. Many of these men retreated to the west with the Wehrmacht but others tried to slip back into civilian life; some were promptly denounced and executed, often after only the most rudimentary trial. Others chose to resist the return of Soviet power, with significant consequences.

The year of 1943 had seen the balance of the war tilt still further against Germany, and as 1944 began, the Germans could only face it with doubt and fear. Hitler still believed that the advent of new U-boats might allow the Battle of the Atlantic to be resumed and fought to a successful conclusion, but few senior figures in the army still believed that victory was possible. Manstein and others clung to the belief that they might grind down the Red Army and force some sort of 'draw' from which a negotiated peace might arise, but this belief showed their lack of understanding of the implacable opposition of the Allied Powers to Hitler and the Nazis – while the Führer remained in power, there could be no negotiated peace, not least because he would never accept such a peace. On the other side of the front line, there was growing confidence. Soviet troops had reached the former western border of the Soviet Union in Ukraine late in 1943 and it seemed that the complete liberation of all Soviet territories was only a matter of time. The Germans clung to the hope that as had been the case in previous years, the spring thaw would force a pause in major operations and would allow the battered German units to catch their breath, but despite being badly worn down in the fighting of 1943, the armies arrayed against the Wehrmacht in Ukraine were in a position to strike some major blows before the end of the winter. Furthermore, the Red Army was far more mobile than it had been in earlier years, not least due to the huge numbers of trucks sent to the Soviet Union by the Western Allies, and *Stavka* had no intention of allowing the spring thaw to bring an automatic halt to operations. There would be no respite for the battered German divisions while there remained any possibility of further Soviet gains.

CHAPTER 2

THE KIROVOGRAD ENCIRCLEMENT

The Red Army's pursuit of the retreating Wehrmacht continued across the Dnepr at many points, rendering any plans for using the river as a defensive line unfeasible. Although early Soviet attempts to exploit their bridgeheads had mixed results – Kiev was captured on the anniversary of the October Revolution, but the advance on Krivoy Rog was beaten off with heavy losses, and the first attempts to exploit west from Kiev resulted in the Soviet tank forces being badly mauled – there was still appetite for further attacks. A multitude of tempting targets lay before the Red Army, and there were discussions in December 1943 about a renewed attack into the Dnepr bend from the north by 2nd Ukrainian Front's centre and left flank. Such an attack would threaten to isolate the German forces in the small bridgehead at Nikopol – which Hitler had declared as essential for Germany's war effort because of its manganese mines, regardless of Speer's assertions – and might result in the position of the southern wing of the German position in Ukraine becoming impossible. The German Seventeenth Army was already isolated in Crimea, and a successful Soviet breakout from its positions to the west of Dnepropetrovsk, into the area to the west of Nikopol, could then be developed into a drive to the Black Sea coast, thus trapping the German Sixth Army along the lower Dnepr. However, an attack in this direction was not without considerable risk, as the substantial number of panzer divisions available to Army Group South might be able to concentrate against the western flank of the Soviet thrust.

By the end of 1943, the continuing – albeit slow – progress of Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front to the west and southwest of Kiev resulted in a reappraisal and attention turned to Kirovograd, on 2nd Ukrainian Front's right flank. As a road and rail junction, the city was of considerable importance to the Germans and during December 1943 Konev's forces carried out extensive reconnaissance. They identified two lines of German defences – a series of strongpoints forming the main line, and a weaker second line about four miles (7km) further back. Even if both lines had been properly constructed, this was too shallow a defensive system to stand up to a major attack and reports confirmed what Konev already knew: the German infantry divisions manning the line were numerically weak and would almost certainly be unable to offer prolonged resistance. Nevertheless, an attack on the city would not be straightforward, as Konev later wrote:

> When we assessed the situation and made our decisions, the Front command took into account that the terrain of the combat area was open with sparse vegetation, though there were several deep ravines running mostly perpendicular to our axis of attack. This created some difficulties for our troops, especially the tanks. In addition, the Nazis had made good use of hills for defensive positions and villages, some of them quite large, were also fortified for defence. The enemy could use the valleys and ravines to manoeuvre their reserves as well as cover for their artillery and mortar positions.
>
> Weather conditions were favourable. Dry weather was forecast with a slight frost, insignificant snow fall reaching only 20cm [eight inches], no snowdrifts, and good roads – all of this contributed to ease of manoeuvre for our troops and the movement of all necessary supplies. But thick cloud and fog would limit aviation operations and impeded the work of the artillery.
>
> In preparing and planning the operation, I sent my initial thoughts to *Stavka* and received approval. The main task of the Front was to smash the enemy's Kirovograd grouping and cut off its escape routes to the west.
>
> I was determined to prevent the Germans from mounting a 'comfortable' defence in the favourable environment of a big city. It was necessary to drive them into open ground and defeat them there without having to destroy urban centres.[1]

Konev planned an attack on converging axes with Fifth Guards Army and Fifty-Third Army on the northern flank and a more powerful force consisting of Seventh Guards Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army on the southern flank. The northern group was to bypass Kirovograd by the second day of the attack, while the southern group reached a similar line about six miles (10km) west of the city. The intention was to encircle the Germans near or even in Kirovograd, regardless of Konev's wishes to avoid costly and destructive urban fighting. The overall advance – perhaps

40 miles (70km) at most in order to achieve this encirclement – was within the capabilities of the forces available, even though they were far from being at full strength. The plans put forth by *Stavka* talked about exploiting any initial success to advance a further 60 miles (100km) to Pervomaisk on the Southern Bug River, but it was questionable whether the attacking forces had the strength or logistic support to mount such a deep penetration.[2] Manstein had already demonstrated his ability to launch deadly counterattacks against isolated Soviet spearheads, and an advance to secure crossings over the Southern Bug would only be possible if the initial success of the attack on Kirovograd markedly weakened the Wehrmacht.

The commander of Fifth Guards Army was Colonel-General Pavel Alexeyevich Rotmistrov. After serving as chief of staff of a mechanised corps at the beginning of the war, he came to Stalin's attention when he produced a detailed and accurate analysis of the weakness of Soviet armoured unit structure in mid-1942. He led III Guards Tank Corps in the Soviet attacks to drive back the German Fourth Panzer Army to Kotelnikovo, near Stalingrad, in late 1942. He was appointed commander of Fifth Guards Tank Army when it was formed the following February and his command was then involved in a series of costly battles. Extensively rebuilt after losing much of its armoured strength in Manstein's counterattack of March 1943, Fifth Guards Tank Army played a leading part in the Battle of Prokhorovka, the final act of the Battle of Kursk, and was then heavily involved in Operation *Polkovodets-Rumyantsev*, the attack that saw the Red Army recapture Belgorod, Kharkov and Akhtyrka. At the end of this action its tank strength was reduced to just 50 or 60 operational vehicles but within a month had been largely restored – at least numerically – by a mixture of Soviet-built T-34s and British and American tanks. Konev used Fifth Guards Tank Army in his attempt to penetrate to Krivoy Rog in the autumn of 1943 and once more the army's tank units were badly depleted, both in the attacks on Krivoy Rog and the German counterattack that followed. Once more, the huge resources available to the Soviet Union were in stark contrast to the problems faced by Germany, and Rotmistrov's army was brought back towards full strength through a mixture of replacements and the transfer of fresh formations to replace its worn-out corps. Despite this, it was still below establishment strength in January, though powerful enough to carry out the attack that Konev planned.

It would have been usual practice to hold back Fifth Guards Tank Army until Seventh Guards Army had gained sufficient ground for the tanks to be committed into relatively open space, but due to the losses his Front had suffered in the preceding months, Konev was unable to allocate any tank or mechanised formations to Colonel General Mikhail Stepanovich Shumilov's Seventh Guards

Army to help it achieve the initial breakthrough. Consequently, Rotmistrov had to release two tank brigades to support the first assault. Preparations for the attack had to be made quickly, with operational orders reaching the field armies on 2 January, just three days before the planned start date. Zhukov wished to oversee the operation but was busy with Vatutin, whose Front had been in continuous action through the winter in the region southwest and west of Kiev. Like Konev, he was keen to avoid getting drawn into what might be a prolonged and costly battle for the urban area of Kirovograd, and reached the headquarters of Fifth Guards Army on 5 January. Here, he met the army commander, General Alexei Semenovich Zhadov, and stressed the importance of a rapid advance by VII Mechanised Corps, Zhadov's armoured strike force:

> Pay close attention to developments on the flanks of the army and don't miss the right moment to commit VII Mechanised Corps. It may be that the outcome of the entire Kirovograd Operation will depend on the actions of Fifth Guards Army.[3]

Despite many of them having the designation of 'Guards' – a distinction granted to formations involved in notable victories and the liberation of large towns and cities – the units of 2nd Ukrainian Front contained a mixture of veterans and new recruits brought in to replenish their ranks. Efim Abramovich Yankelevich had reached the front line partway through 1943 and was involved in heavy fighting as Konev's divisions reached and crossed the Dnepr. Some of the things he saw left lifelong memories:

> Literally from my first steps in the front line, the war showed me its macabre face. As soon as we reached the [west] bank of the Dnepr, a monstrous, unbelievable picture appeared before me. On the bare steppe, as far as the eye could see, lay hundreds of dead soldiers. They had fallen as they marched forward … Like automata, we moved on, sometimes passing and even stepping over the bodies of the dead men. This was the price that had been paid for our trouble-free crossing of the Dnepr![4]

During the winter fighting, Yankelevich and his comrades found themselves involved in the heavy fighting near Krivoy Rog. As they marched to the forming-up areas for the attack on Kirovograd, they saw once more the pitiless nature of fighting on the Eastern Front:

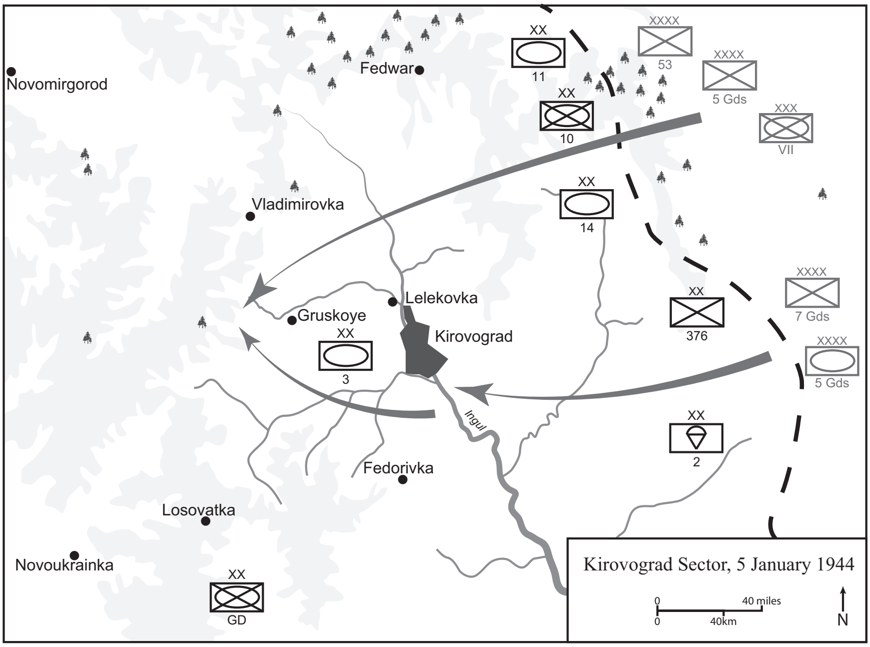
> [My platoon commander] called to me, 'Look over to the right. See, there's a soldier's head peeping out of a trench. According to my information, there

> shouldn't be any units here. Run over and find out who he's with.' I ran carefully to avoid slipping and breaking my neck. During a thaw, tanks must have passed through, leaving deep ruts with their tracks in the muddy ground, edged with black clods of compressed and stiffened mud.
>
> When I raised my eyes from the ground, I realised that the soldier wasn't moving. As I approached I saw that there was no trench here, just a deep furrow from the tank's track. The soldier had been crushed into the ground, where he had frozen. Only now did I understand why the furrows looped from side to side, as if the tank had been waltzing. Obviously, it was chasing the poor fellow until it slammed him into the mud like a worm. I was shocked by what I saw. 'This could have happened to me,' flashed through my mind. What a horror this man had been forced to endure with this monstrous colossus chasing him and, while he was still alive, overtaking him and pressing him into the mud. Death from a bullet or shrapnel was incomparably easier, if you could put it that way, as it was unexpected and instantaneous, compared to the horror this soldier endured for several minutes as he tried to wriggle out of imminent death under the tracks. What did this poor man feel in the last moments of his life? What did the crew think – and were they even human – when their tank was chasing this poor fellow? In all likelihood they encouraged the driver and probably congratulated him on the successful conclusion to their 'operation'. That was our enemy![5]

Yankelevich may have been bitterly angry at the manner in which the Soviet soldier had been deliberately run down by the German tank, but there were plenty of occasions when the Red Army's tank crews treated German infantry in the same manner. For the Germans the war against the Soviet Union had been characterised by Hitler as a *Rassenkrieg* ('race war') for the future of Europe, and from the outset the invading armies behaved with little regard for the rules of warfare. Whilst many German accounts written after the war often attempted to blame all atrocities on the SS – and accounts written by former *Waffen-SS* personnel blamed rear area units – there were few German divisions that had an entirely clean record. The soldiers of the Soviet Union had been extensively prepared for war with stories of the brutality of the hated German invaders, and many men had seen first-hand the evidence of atrocities committed by the Germans and their auxiliaries in occupied areas. Many soldiers had families who were still in German-held areas, and the desire for merciless revenge was widespread; however, there is plentiful evidence of Soviet troops showing little hesitation in executing prisoners during the opening days and weeks of the war, before they had any experience of German behaviour.

Despite preparations being made in just a few days, the Germans were aware that an attack was coming – indeed, the compressed timetable made the task of disguising preparations harder. Manstein and Wöhler met to consider the likelihood of a Soviet attack on 3 January and the following day Wöhler briefed his staff; they agreed that an attack was imminent.[6] At least in theory, the German Eighth Army was a powerful force with a total of 11 infantry divisions and five panzer divisions organised into three corps, but none were remotely near full strength. To make matters worse, stocks of artillery ammunition were low; it was normal German defensive doctrine for artillery to play a key role in defeating enemy attacks, and this shortage of ammunition would play an important part in the fighting that followed.

The forces arrayed by the Wehrmacht along the front line to the east of Kirovograd were impressive on paper. To the northeast of the town of Fedwar (now named Pidlisne) were 282nd, 106th and 320th Infantry Divisions; none were remotely near full strength but they had at least been assigned relatively modest sectors of the front line. To their south was a sector of perhaps 20 miles (32km) that was held by three armoured formations – 11th Panzer Division,


Novomirgorod
Fedwar
XX
11
XX
10
XXXX
53
XXXX
5 Gds
XXX
VII
Vladimirovka
XX
14
Lelekovka
Gruskoye
Kirovograd
XX
3
XX
376
XXXX
7 Gds
XXXX
5 Gds
Ingul
XX
2
Fedorivka
Losovatka
Novoukrainka
XX
GD
0
40 miles
0
40km
N

Kirovograd Sector, 5 January 1944

10th Panzergrenadier Division, and 14th Panzer Division. Again, none of these were at full strength and their presence in the front line was dictated by shortages of infantry – ideally, units like these should have been held some distance behind the front line, ready to use their mobility to launch destructive counterattacks against Soviet attacking units. South of 14th Panzer Division was 376th Infantry Division, with 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* ('Parachute') Division completing the line to the south. Unlike the airborne units of the British and American forces, German parachute units were part of the Luftwaffe rather than the army. This particular division had seen heavy fighting in Italy in 1943, and when it was sent to the Eastern Front in the autumn, it left several elements behind in the west. It lacked some of the heavy equipment of an infantry division, and in its weakened state its ability to hold positions for a prolonged period in the face of armoured attacks was very limited. Behind these units was 3rd Panzer Division, ready to intervene in the event of any Soviet penetration.

Any doubts about the imminence of a Soviet attack disappeared on the morning of 4 January, when Red Army units carried out aggressive reconnaissance probes of up to battalion strength, seeking weak points in the defences and securing favourable positions for the main attack formations. Early on 5 January, the massed artillery of 2nd Ukrainian Front began its preparatory bombardment of the German defences. Rotmistrov later recalled the scene:

> It was cold at dawn on 5 January. Thick fog lay on the ground. From my vantage point, the nearest front line trenches, the communications trenches, and the outlines of the white-painted tanks were barely visible.
>
> The fog was a mixed blessing. We were pleased that the enemy could not conduct accurate long-range fire, but I was worried that our aviation would not be able to carry out its missions in these conditions and we would be deprived of air support.
>
> At 0810, just as the morning began to replace the predawn twilight, tons of deadly metal fell on the Fascists' positions. Nothing could be seen from the observation post because of the fog and all I could do was listen to the rumble of battle and wait for reports. There were particularly loud sounds from the area around Plavni.
>
> … With the beginning of the attack on the leading edge of the enemy's defences, the infantry units of Seventh Guards Army encountered stubborn resistance from the Nazis and in two hours of fighting they advanced only 2km. Reports came that the enemy had a large number of tanks, 88mm guns, mortars

> and other weapons that had not been suppressed by the artillery bombardment. In addition, dense minefields and multiple rows of barbed wire were found in the path of our advancing troops.[7]

The use of Soviet infantry in initial attacks has often been regarded as wasteful. Soldiers in all armies became accustomed to the danger that they constantly faced and many veterans recall that there was a widespread belief that they would not survive the war – once men had adopted such a mindset, it seemed to help them deal with the uncertainty of day-to-day life. Soviet accounts of the care that their commanders took to keep losses low are variable. Grigory Antonovich Russkikh was a typical Soviet infantryman:

> I didn't think that I would survive, because in the front line there were rarely any quiet days and many men died each day … We rarely had full platoons, the usual situation was just 8–10 men …
>
> Our commanders often took care of us and always tried to keep losses down. One example I remember favourably was our regiment commander Trofim Alekseevich Kolymbet who led us to Vienna itself … [He] was a very aggressive, intelligent and strict officer who always looked after the men. And our division commander was also a harsh and strict commander.[8]

Other soldiers had a less favourable view of their commanders:

> There was not the slightest expectation that we would survive. We were sure that we would all be killed. You have to understand, there was no reason to believe otherwise. Throughout the war, the infantry led the way, regardless of what anyone says. All these stories of the generals in their memoirs about all manner of skilful tactics and ingenious manoeuvres, I'll leave to those who wrote them. In each attack, we went into the slaughter, like going under the knife in the slaughterhouse, and just a few fragments emerged after each battle. I wanted only one thing – to die painlessly and to exact a heavy price for my life.
>
> They say that in war a person quickly gets use to everything, they say that his nerves become like iron. But when you see the crew of an anti-tank gun crushed by the tracks of a German tank, anyone's nerve can fail.[9]

The infantry of Seventh Guards Army encountered strong initial resistance from 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division. Konev's staff officers had a good idea of which enemy units they faced and had calculated that they might be opposed by up to

500 tanks and assault guns, but such numbers were only possible if all of Wöhler's units were at establishment strength – it was fairly common practice for commanders at every level, on both sides of the front line, to exaggerate the strength of enemy units facing them, at least partly so that in the event of failure, they might be able to use these exaggerated figures as mitigation. In reality, the German divisions had fewer than half their assigned strength of tanks and most of these were not in the immediate front line, but the defences generally held firm despite Rotmistrov throwing all of his two first-echelon tank corps into the battle. As darkness fell, gains were modest but the losses suffered by the Germans were serious and it was highly unlikely that similar resistance would be possible the following day.

Sergei Andreevich Otroschenkov was a crewman in one of Rotmistrov's tanks during the attack:

> The artillery carried out a powerful preparatory bombardment but when we moved forward, it turned out that the Germans had withdrawn their troops from the first line of defence and the artillery hit empty trenches. Our tanks attacked and after a few kilometres the Germans met us with well-organised powerful fire near the village of Plavni. All day we tried in vain to break through the German defence. The battalion and the entire brigade suffered heavy losses.
>
> At night, we moved to the village of Andreevka. I sat in the commander's seat in the tank and Ivan [the tank commander], tired after a day of combat, sat behind the turret and rested. The tanks crossed a field. Suddenly, shelling began. When the tank passed a haystack, Ivan jumped off and took cover behind it. But there were Germans there too and they shot him at point-blank range … Ivan Ivanovich Rodin was a real friend, a front-line comrade. His death upset me greatly. The next day our battalion captured some prisoners. This never happened to me again and I forbade my subordinates from acting like this, but on that day I broke. I shot the captured Germans myself. I got a good dressing-down from the brigade commander, but there was no serious punishment.[10]

The northern thrust of Konev's Front fell on the ranks of 10th Panzergrenadier Division. Like all of Army Group South's armoured units, it had been in almost continuous combat since the previous summer, covering the retreat of the army group to and over the Dnepr. For much of the summer and autumn of 1943, the division had fewer than ten tanks and assault guns available and the two grenadier regiments operated with just a handful of officers between them.[11] During the retreat, it was only through the application of stern disciplinary measures that complete collapse of morale and discipline was avoided and the exhausted men had struggled on in the hope and expectation of finding well-constructed defensive positions awaiting them on the Dnepr. When they reached the river, the reality was very different – Hitler had given approval for the construction of fortifications far too late for very much to be achieved. After being involved in almost constant fighting to hold back the Soviet attempts to push out of their bridgeheads over the Dnepr, the division now found itself in the path of Zhadov's attack and after putting up determined initial resistance it had no choice but to fall back when its ammunition stocks became depleted. In the entire sector of XLVII Panzer Corps, of which 10th Panzergrenadier Division was a part, the German artillery fired about 177,000 shells during the first two days of the Soviet attack.[12] Sustaining such a high rate of consumption was simply impossible. Immediately to the south of 10th Panzergrenadier Division, 14th Panzer Division was able to repulse the first wave of Soviet attacks without major difficulty and some of the division's tanks were able to help the next division in the line, 376th Infantry Division, to hold its positions.

Yankelevich was in one of the divisions that took part in the northern attack:

> At dawn we settled into a shallow ravine. When I looked around I was astounded to see how many artillery and mortar batteries there were … I don't remember how long the artillery preparation lasted before the assault, but the whole ravine belched fire. After the end of the artillery bombardment we followed the tanks which advanced almost unhindered over the field, recently covered by snow. Now it was black from countless craters, large and small. All the German firing positions were destroyed and there was nothing alive. In my experience of war, this was the only time that an assault was so well organised … We advanced for some time into the rear of the German positions until we ran into defences … Finally, we reached the outskirts of a village, which I recall was called Gruzki. Here we took up defensive positions. By this time we no longer had a platoon commander and it was said that the company commander was also wounded. Here I saw a German prisoner being shot. My mortar was standing outside a hut in the village and I saw two tall soldiers dragging the prisoner out. He was an elderly soldier in his fifties. Realising his fate, he cried out and said something quickly. He was shot.[13]

The Soviet forces attacking 10th Panzergrenadier Division were from Zhadov's main mobile force, VII Mechanised Corps. Rapidly exploiting the withdrawal of 10th Panzergrenadier Division, the Soviet tanks probed the northern flank of

14th Panzer Division. In response, the commander of the German division, Generalleutnant Martin Unrein, dispatched an armoured battlegroup to ensure that the lines of communication to the rear were not overrun. This group was able to prevent any further incursions into the rear of the panzer division but was too weak to launch any sort of attack towards the north to restore the situation. As darkness fell on the first day of the operation, Soviet forces were advancing rapidly through the gaps they had torn either side of 14th Panzer Division and had crossed the Ingul River, their objective for the day.

With the southern attack making less progress, Konev made changes to his original plan. Rotmistrov's second echelon, VIII Mechanised Corps, was ordered to move to the northern group where it would be assigned to Fifth Guards Army and would attack alongside VII Mechanised Corps.[14] Rotmistrov was busy near the front line trying to coordinate his two tank corps with Seventh Guards Army's infantry and learned about the transfer of VIII Mechanised Corps from his chief of staff:

> Major General [Vladimir Nikolaevich] Baskakov informed me of this on the radio when I was with the combat formations of XVIII and XXIX Tank Corps. He also informed me that Marshal Zhukov, the representative of *Stavka*, had arrived at my observation post and wanted to see me. Having issued the necessary orders to Generals Kirichenko and Polozkov … I immediately went to the observation post in my tank.
>
> 'How are things going?' he met me with a simple question.
>
> 'It's going well.' The marshal listened carefully to my report while he considered the location of the troops, marked on the operational map. I told him that from the very first minutes of the battle, the enemy had resisted Seventh Guards Army fiercely and I therefore had to reinforce the infantry with two tank brigades, and then commit both tank corps to the battle.
>
> Zhukov looked up from the map. 'And you know that Konev has transferred [Major General Abram Matveevich] Khazin's VIII Mechanised Corps to Zhadov's army?
>
> 'Yes, my chief of staff reported this to me. I just don't understand why my second echelon should be taken away. It was intended to exploit success and particularly to defeat enemy counterattacks as we bypass Kirovograd.'
>
> Zhukov smiled slyly. 'Prove to me that your army will cope with its tasks without VIII Mechanised Corps. Of course, the decisive assault by Zhadov's army will help you succeed, as the enemy will have to withdraw some of his forces from the southern and southwestern sectors and move them northwest.' The marshal

> looked sympathetically at me. His harsh features softened with a smile. 'Commanders or soldiers who do not seek to be the first to be victorious are bad. I like healthy ambition.'[15]

Rotmistrov had enjoyed a rapid rise to his current prominent position. He had caught Stalin's eye and the Soviet leader personally selected him to command Fifth Guards Tank Army but as has already been described, his army had repeatedly suffered serious casualties. In the Battle of Prokhorovka, his formations clashed with the German forces and succeeded in stopping the Germans from breaking the last major line of defence – but even this was at a massive cost, with his tank army losing several times as many tanks as the Germans. Indeed, his account of the fighting, both at the time and in his memoirs, exaggerated the losses inflicted on the Germans, probably at least partly to justify the casualties that his units had suffered, and much of the 'myth' of Prokhorovka being the great clash of armour in which the striking power of the panzer divisions was dealt an irreparable blow derives from Rotmistrov's somewhat misleading accounts.[16] On every occasion that it was sent into action, Fifth Guards Tank Army had failed to achieve the sort of decisive breakthrough expected of it. In defence of Rotmistrov, it was preferred Soviet practice for the tank formations to be held back until the infantry had achieved a breach, after which the tanks would be unleashed, and throughout 1943 (and now in 1944) Rotmistrov had been forced to commit his tanks to help achieve the initial penetration. However, it should be remembered that other commanders – including the Germans – often used armour to aid the initial breakthrough without suffering such heavy casualties, and this incident was perhaps the first overt sign that the confidence of senior figures in the Red Army in Rotmistrov was beginning to run out.

General Nikolaus von Vormann, the commander of XLVII Panzer Corps, was aware of the limited capability of 10th Panzergrenadier Division and had already ordered 3rd Panzer Division to the area. The panzer division detrained in Kirovograd as the Soviet offensive began and was promptly ordered to take up positions alongside 10th Panzergrenadier Division to the north of the city. Generalleutnant Fritz von Bayerlein, commander of 3rd Panzer Division, took the precaution of dispatching his armoured reconnaissance battalion to the sector first and his fears were soon confirmed: the leading Soviet armoured elements had already bypassed the northern flank of the German defences around Kirovograd. Orders were issued for 3rd Panzer Division to concentrate its forces as best as possible in order to launch a counterattack the following morning.[17] At the same time, 14th Panzer Division would assemble its armour to join the attack. From the north, 11th Panzer Division would attack towards the units of XLVII Panzer Corps in a pincer movement. Deep snow hindered all the German divisions as they struggled into position; some of the soldiers consoled themselves that the Soviet units must also be finding movement difficult.

Whilst the Soviet penetration to the northeast of Kirovograd caused considerable alarm in Vormann's headquarters, it drew attention away from the growing crisis to the southeast, where 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division was approaching the end of its strength. By the standards of the Eastern Front, its losses were comparatively modest – during the Kirovograd battles, it lost a total of a little under 800 killed, wounded or missing – but it started the battle below strength and without several battalions, despite which it had been assigned a segment of front line appropriate to a full-strength division. Vormann had committed his armoured reserves to restore the situation to the north, leaving him with nothing that could be used to shore up the line elsewhere. It was of critical importance that the armoured counterattack achieved success rapidly so that 3rd Panzer Division could be withdrawn and made available to intervene elsewhere. The counterattack began at first light on 6 January. Despite the deep snow, 14th Panzer Division succeeded in reaching the villages of Krasny Kut and Roshnatovka and 3rd Panzer Division occupied the village of Lelekovka, immediately north of Kirovograd. However, even these modest advances consumed almost all of the artillery ammunition that the German units had; from the north, 11th Panzer Division – which, like all the German armoured units that had been in almost constant combat through the autumn and winter, was barely more than a battlegroup in strength – also managed to make some headway, and by the end of the day its leading elements were perhaps three miles from 3rd Panzer Division's spearheads. Critically, 3rd Panzer Division was now tied down in fighting to the north of Kirovograd and was unavailable to intervene against any other Soviet attacks.

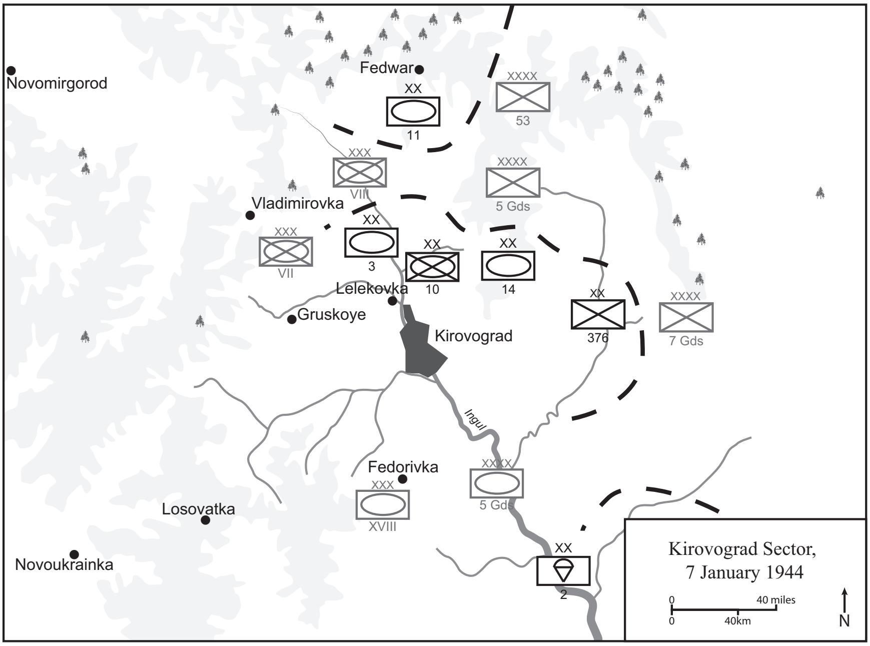
It was inevitable in a battle with both sides attempting to advance that units became isolated and – at least temporarily – cut off from their comrades. Yankelevich and his battalion learned from the German soldier they captured (and then executed) that they had been surrounded by German units. To their consternation, the soldiers discovered that their battalion commander was missing and a staff officer now took command. As they attempted to link up with friendly units during the following night, Yankelevich was ordered to stay at a road junction in order to direct stragglers. After they thought that the last of their unit had passed, Yankelevich and a fellow soldier made their way to the next village where the staff officer had told them he would wait for them. Here, they entered the building where they had been told they would find their impromptu commander:

> There were none of our men in the house, and a frightened woman said that the Germans had just been to the neighbouring house. We had to leave soon if we were to avoid running into them. We soon caught up with a small column of vehicles. I made my way to its head. Here a road crossed transversely, and a German column drove past in a continuous stream with its headlights extinguished. The Germans had seen our small column but clearly decided not to get embroiled – they probably thought they lacked the strength for a fight. I waited until the last tank had passed … When my comrade and I reached the battalion's assembly area the following day I was constantly gnawed by doubts. Perhaps I should have searched harder for the staff officer. I reproached myself. When I rejoined the battalion, it turned out that the staff officer had not left anyone from the company in that village [where Yankelevich had been told to go after completing his mission at the road junction]. He deliberately left us to be killed. For him we were just simple pawns in his military chess game.[18]

Zhadov's memoirs make no mention of the German counterattack. The main striking force of VII Mechanised Corps had already moved further west and while the three German panzer divisions struggled forward through the snow and the defensive lines set up by Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army, the Soviet tanks continued to push west past the northern outskirts of Kirovograd. On the southern flank of the battle, Rotmistrov ordered his tanks to continue their efforts to advance throughout the night and by dawn on 6 January they had managed to push forward about six miles (10km). In constant contact with the German forces before them, the Soviet units continued to press closer to Kirovograd. It is a measure of the strength of German resistance that on the southern axis, the second echelon of troops – intended to exploit beyond Kirovograd – had all been committed to the attack towards the city from the southeast by the end of the day. Nevertheless, as darkness fell the leading units were fighting in the outskirts of Kirovograd.

There was little point in prolonged German resistance in the city, especially with strong Soviet armoured units having bypassed it to the north. Vormann gave orders for his corps-level units to pull back further west and, as had consistently been the case during the German withdrawal across Ukraine, there were widespread demolitions of buildings and facilities that might prove useful to the advancing Soviet forces. In many cases, the smoke and debris from these demolitions hampered the withdrawal operation, leading to increasing confusion; unable to secure sufficient ambulances to evacuate the wounded men under his care, the senior medical officer of 3rd Panzer Division used a single heavy prime mover and a commandeered truck to transport as many men as possible to safety.[19] Soviet forces from Seventh Guards Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army began to fight their way into the city, their shelling adding to the growing chaos. Shumilov had commanded Seventh Guards Army from the moment that his previous command, Sixty-Fourth Army, was thus renamed in recognition of its role in the defence of Stalingrad and he had been recognised personally for leading from the front during the forcing of crossings over the Dnepr. Like many Soviet commanders of the era, he made up for the weakness in numerical strength of his divisions by concentrating them as tightly as he could and then throwing them repeatedly at the German lines, which inevitably began to buckle. After finally overcoming German resistance, XVIII Tank Corps, part of Rotmistrov's tank army, succeeded in slipping past the southern outskirts of Kirovograd early on 7 January and reached Fedorivka, about nine miles (15km) southwest of the centre of Kirovograd. The two Soviet mechanised corps that had been committed north of Kirovograd were also still advancing and their leading elements cut the railway line running due west from the city. Although the two Soviet spearheads were still several miles apart, they had effectively isolated Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps in and to the north of Kirovograd.

Konev and his army commanders now threw their forces at the encirclement in order to overwhelm it before it could react. In order to prevent the Germans from establishing all-round defences in the encirclement and repairing the breach in their front line, Konev issued new instructions to his subordinates. In the north, Fifty-Third Army was to advance on Novomirgorod, a town about 32 miles (52km) to the northwest of Kirovograd. To aid it in this advance, it would be supported by VIII Mechanised Corps, while Fifth Guards Army took up defensive positions to the west and northwest of Kirovograd. Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army was to press forward towards Novoukrainka, a similar distance to the southwest of Kirovograd, while Seventh Guards Army followed in support.[20] The elimination of the encircled German forces was expected to be achieved in a single day. However, the Germans were acutely aware of their predicament and had no intention of sitting passively in their positions while they were destroyed. Although the commanders of the encircled divisions received news that the *Grossdeutschland* division was hastening to the area, they decided that the situation was deteriorating too fast for them to await rescue. Unrein's 14th Panzer Division was ordered to shore up the situation in Kirovograd,


Novomirgorod
Fedwar
XX
11
XXXX
53
XXX
VIII
XXXX
5 Gds
Vladimirovka
XXX
VII
XX
3
XX
10
XX
14
Lelekovka
Gruskoye
Kirovograd
XX
376
XXXX
7 Gds
Ingul
Fedorivka
XXX
XVIII
XXXX
5 Gds
Losovatka
Novoukrainka
XX
2
0
40 miles
0
40km
N

Kirovograd Sector,
7 January 1944

abandoning all parts of the city on the east bank of the River Ingul, which ran through the city. The division's two panzergrenadier regiments were immediately thrown into the confused fighting in the southern part of Kirovograd but when the panzer regiment attempted to follow from its positions to the northeast of Kirovograd, it found it impossible to reach the road bridge across the river. As 7 January drew to a close, three German tanks appeared from the north and approached the lines still held by 14th Panzer Division's tanks: they were from 11th Panzer Division and had succeeded in driving right across the rear of Konev's northern attack group. Unfortunately for the encircled German divisions, the rest of 11th Panzer Division remained many miles to the north.[21]

A breakout by the German troops encircled by the Soviet advance – 3rd and 14th Panzer Divisions, 10th Panzergrenadier Division, and 376th Infantry Division – was now their only hope. Before this could be attempted, it was vital to concentrate the divisions to prevent them from being overwhelmed in isolation. The bulk of the encircled forces were ordered to attempt to reach the northern outskirts of Kirovograd, and 3rd Panzer Division launched an attack late on 7 January towards the northwest. Advancing through the night, Bayerlein's division succeeded in linking up with parts of 11th Panzer Division near Vladimirovka, about 14 miles (23km) northwest of Kirovograd. Here, Bayerlein was able to re-establish contact with Vormann's headquarters, having been out of contact for most of the previous day – as a consequence, he appears to have been unaware of the general intention to concentrate the encircled forces before attempting a breakout. The Soviet units that his division had penetrated in order to escape restored their lines behind him. The rest of the troops encircled in and around Kirovograd remained isolated.

With the German forces in Kirovograd steadily pulling back towards the northern outskirts, Konev's troops penetrated into the city centre early on 8 January. By mid-morning, the city was effectively in their hands. Nevertheless, the German regrouping had been carried out more or less to plan and 10th Panzergrenadier Division and 376th Infantry Division were in position to defend the area around Lelekovka from the east and southeast, while 14th Panzer Division was deployed a little to the west. Contact with other German units had been sporadic at best since the leading Soviet forces had swept around either side of Kirovograd, but at this stage a most unwelcome message was received: Hitler had declared Lelekovka a fortress, to be held at all costs until the front line could be restored.

Hitler's 'fortress' declarations were to become an increasingly frequent interference in front-line matters as the year progressed. His perception of the unwillingness of Manstein and Army Group South to stand firm has already been described, and the 'fortress' policy was an attempt to enforce obedience with his wishes. From his distant headquarters, with little or no comprehension of the terrain or the strength of the units on both sides, he repeatedly attempted to force the troops in the front line to stand fast and hold back the Soviet onslaught by forbidding any withdrawals. Such a policy had worked effectively when Zhukov unleashed his counteroffensive outside Moscow in late 1941, but Hitler repeatedly failed to recognise that the situation was now very different. The Red Army was a far more formidable opponent, and the comparative balance of power now lay firmly in its advantage. Such orders carried the considerable risk of effectively condemning the units designated to destruction or captivity, but the reluctance of German officers to ignore direct orders remained strong. In the case of the current declaration – that Lelekovka was to be held until the front line could be restored – there were additional factors that showed how nonsensical the order was. How the front line could be restored while the troops whose mobility was vital for any such restoration of the front remained immobile in a so-called fortress was beyond the comprehension of the local commanders.

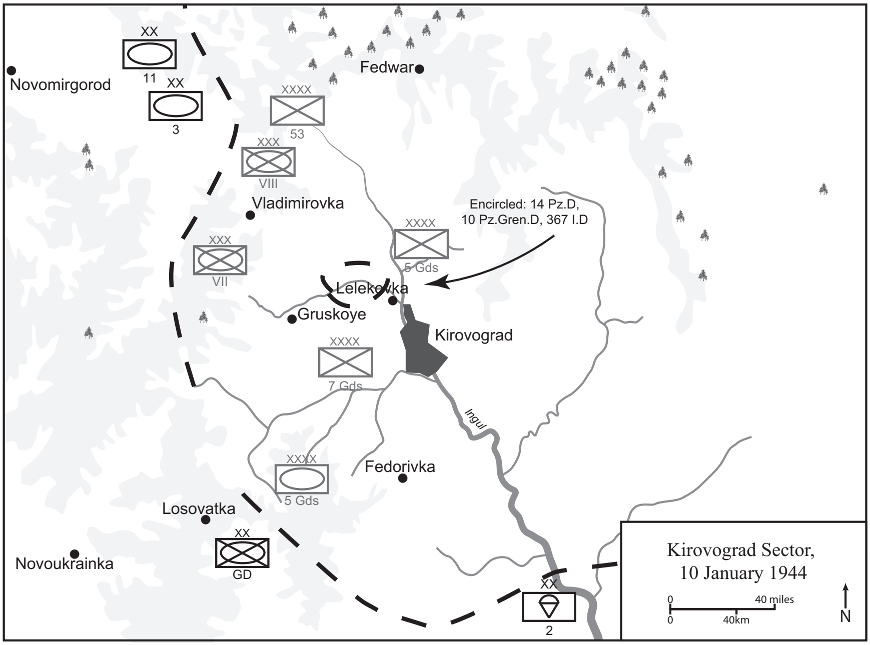
The pursuing Soviet forces were in almost continuous contact with the encircled Germans and the new perimeter around Lelekovka came under pressure almost as soon as it was created, but the first attacks were relatively uncoordinated and were soon repulsed. Nevertheless, Unrein was aware that his 14th Panzer Division had just 11 tanks and assault guns remaining and time was running out:

> In particular, [the enemy's] particularly significant artillery advantage soon made itself unpleasantly felt. With only limited hindrance from our artillery, whose ammunition stocks had been almost exhausted and could only be used most sparingly, battery after battery took up position on the commanding heights to the east and north, from where almost the entire encirclement could be overseen, and at the same time deployed on the southern sector. Their constant fire at first was directed only at the infantry positions and as a result of them being only thinly manned, caused only minimal losses, but later fell on our heavy weapons and headquarters, forcing constant changes of position. The systematic bombardment of the village itself [Lelekovka] by heavy-calibre weapons demonstrated an intention to prevent any movement within the encirclement and to eliminate any remaining cover and shelter. In short, the 'fortress' would be shot to pieces.
>
> The same effect was achieved by repeated heavy air attacks, against which the few anti-aircraft units, most of whose weapons had to be committed to the fighting on the ground, could not put up any adequate defence.[22]

Immediately before the encirclement, the supply units of the encircled German divisions had been ordered to withdraw to the west before the Soviet ring closed around Kirovograd. This now proved to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, significant numbers of rear area personnel, with limited combat usefulness, were successfully pulled back to safety; on the other hand, the ability of the formations in the 'fortress' to sustain themselves was now limited to the resources that the combat formations had at the moment that they were cut off. Fortunately, some fighting elements of 14th Panzer Division – mainly from its reconnaissance battalion – were also outside the encirclement. During the afternoon of 8 January, Vormann organised a column of trucks with vital fuel and food supplies led by 14th Panzer Division's reconnaissance battalion and during the following night this group, followed closely by a second column, managed to reach Lelekovka from the west. A handful of German tanks held the road to the west open for the moment, but this contact with the outside world would not survive any determined attempt by the Red Army to sever it. At the same time, Soviet units attacked from the east and northeast in an attempt to crush the encirclement; the heavy anti-aircraft guns of 14th Panzer Division's anti-aircraft battalion were able to knock out several Soviet tanks and a mixture of artillery and machine-gun fire drove off the accompanying Soviet infantry, inflicting heavy losses. Perhaps because of these losses, Soviet attacks on the perimeter the following morning were limited to local probes.

Unrein and the other division commanders within the encirclement expected renewed attempts to eliminate the 'fortress' and knew that this lull would be very brief. Vormann made full use of the pause to take the essential first steps to extract his troops. To the west of Lelekovka was the village of Gruskoye and it was vital that it was recaptured in order to allow supplies to continue to reach Lelekovka, and to allow the withdrawal of the trapped divisions. On 9 January, the only remaining reserves of XLVII Panzer Corps – a security regiment and a few tanks from 14th Panzer Division – attacked from the southwest and rapidly overran the village. After breaking out of the Kirovograd area earlier, 3rd Panzer Division was also available and had been ordered to eliminate Soviet forces that had probed further west, thus further extending the lifeline to the encircled troops. If there was to be any escape to the west, it was vital that the 'fortress' order was rescinded without further delay, and to the relief of Vormann and his subordinates, repeated representations by Manstein's headquarters bore fruit and fresh instructions arrived from *OKH* within hours. The forces in Lelekovka were granted permission to withdraw to the west.

The evacuation of the Lelekovka 'fortress' proceeded with little difficulty; 10th Panzergrenadier Division and 376th Infantry Division pulled out along the road to the west while 14th Panzer Division provided both a rearguard and flank security. Soviet accounts describe how a modest part of the encircled German forces managed to escape, but the reality was that most managed to reach safety. Moreover, the prior evacuation of rear area units ensured that the material losses of the encircled divisions were also modest. Konev could do little to prevent the withdrawal. The northern flank of his attack was coming under pressure from 11th Panzer Division and elements of 3rd Panzer Division, while the leading units of *Grossdeutschland* were attacking from the southwest. After being heavily involved in defensive fighting when Konev attempted to reach and capture Krivoy Rog late in 1943, this division was ordered to pull out of the front line in the first week of the new year in order to be made available for a proposed counterattack to restore the situation on Fourth Panzer Army's northern flank. Struggling along muddy and icy roads, the division's vehicles set off towards Uman, where they were intended to concentrate, and – fortuitously for the Wehrmacht – were to


XX
11
XX
3
Novomirgorod
Fedwar
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53
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VIII
Vladimirovka
Encircled: 14 Pz.D,
10 Pz.Gren.D, 367 I.D
XXXX
5 Gds
XXX
VII
Lelekovka
Gruskoye
Kirovograd
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Ingul
XXXX
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Fedorivka
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Kirovograd Sector, 10 January 1944

the southwest of Kirovograd when Konev's offensive against the city began. Immediately, *Grossdeutschland* was tasked with preventing Konev's forces from exploiting towards the southwest. The price was that any counteroffensive on Fourth Panzer Army's northern flank would now have to be scaled down – even if *Grossdeutschland* could be extracted rapidly from its intervention near Kirovograd, it was certain to have been weakened by combat.

The retreat of 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division after putting up initial resistance to Konev's southern attack group had resulted in a substantial gap opening in the Wehrmacht's front, and it was therefore increasingly unlikely that *Grossdeutschland* would be released quickly. As early as 7 January, the first units of *Grossdeutschland* clashed with Soviet units attempting to exploit this gap in the area to the southwest of Kirovograd. One small group, consisting of a panzergrenadier battalion and an artillery battalion, ran into a Soviet force near the village of Losovatka, about 12 miles (20km) southwest of Kirovograd in thick fog. At first, the Germans drove back the Soviet unit but then realised that they were outnumbered. Fighting on almost all sides, the German group succeeded in holding its positions for the moment.[23] As further elements of *Grossdeutschland* arrived, the battle swung in favour of the Germans and the column was able to advance further towards Kirovograd. By the end of the day, a fragile new front line had been established facing northeast.

The following day, hamstrung by poor weather and uncertainty about the position of the Soviet units in the area, Generalleutnant Walter Hörnlein, commander of *Grossdeutschland*, probed forward with reconnaissance patrols. One such patrol actually reached the lines of 14th Panzer Division near Lelekovka but confused fighting continued through 8 January as *Grossdeutschland* struggled to maintain its line and Soviet units constantly attempted to drive it back. Rotmistrov's tanks were suffering from the same problems as their German opponents: bad weather had grounded reconnaissance flights, and neither side had a clear understanding of the enemy's positions or intentions. Alerted to the approach of a Soviet tank column by one of the few German aircraft flying that day, a pair of 88mm guns from the anti-aircraft battalion of *Grossdeutschland* took up positions near Losovatka:

> The first four T-34s with mounted infantry appeared to the right of the road. While our infantry withdrew in the face of the beginning tank fire and took cover behind our flak artillery, both anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the enemy T-34s. The range was about 2,000m. The T-34s returned fire and very soon scored a hit on 'Berta', which smashed the left side outrigger and wounded the gunner. Meanwhile 'Anton', under the command of Unteroffizier Gierok, scored three hits on a T-34 sitting to the right of the road. Heavy smoke poured from the enemy tank, which was disabled, and the crew fled.
>
> … A fresh supply of ammunition had just been delivered, when another group of enemy tanks, seven this time, appeared on the hill. They approached rapidly under constant fire from our 88mm guns …
>
> 'Anton' took a direct hit on its armour shield. The gunner was slightly injured. The gun crew nevertheless continued working and destroyed another T-34 with the next shot; but 'Anton' was hit repeatedly, until it was unusable and had to cease firing. Half of the gun crew were seriously wounded.
>
> Hauptmann Ruppenberg, who had so far been with the 'Anton' gun, now went to 'Berta', which was still firing. The next shot was another direct hit on the turret of an enemy tank. Pouring smoke, it sought to escape.
>
> A change of targets was ordered and after two more shots another T-34 had been destroyed. 'Berta' then took three hits, but these were ineffective.
>
> Yet another T-34 was destroyed with two shots. The muzzle flash of a further T-34 was spotted on the hill. 'Berta' took aim and fired; but at the same instant there was another flash on the hill and a shell from the T-34 struck the gun's

> pedestal. This gun too was now out of action; most of the crew were severely wounded.
>
> Hauptmann Ruppersberg, who was just talking to [another *Grossdeutschland* unit] by telephone, was also badly wounded and died in a few minutes. All those still living were evacuated immediately and taken to the rear.[24]

This account offers an interesting insight into the efficacy of anti-tank guns. The German 88mm anti-aircraft gun consistently demonstrated its efficacy against tanks throughout the war and was justly feared by the Wehrmacht's opponents, but as this account shows it was relatively common for tanks to continue to function despite being hit several times. Even if a round penetrated the armour of the tank, there was always a possibility that it would fail to hit a critical target within the tank – the crew, the ammunition of the tank, its engine, or fuel tank. It is easy to see how multiple hits on the same tank, perhaps by different guns, could result in inflated claims of the number of enemy vehicles destroyed or disabled. Similarly, both 88mm guns took repeated hits from the attacking Soviet tanks but managed to remain in action. The gun had a large shield to protect its crew and this shield made an inviting target for enemy gunners; however, just as penetrating hits on tanks might fail to hit a critical target within the tank, rounds that struck and penetrated the shield might easily miss either the crew or any critical components behind the shield.

By the end of 8 January, the tanks of *Grossdeutschland*, which had been moving by train, were also available. During the next two days there were constant running battles along the front held by Hörnlein's division with little ground gained by either side, but the presence of such a powerful German unit so close to Kirovograd probably accounts for why Konev was unable to devote more resources to the reduction of the Lelekovka encirclement. Every attempt by Rotmistrov to exploit his army's initial success and to drive towards the southwest was blocked, first by *Grossdeutschland* and then by 14th Panzer Division, which deployed a little further to the northwest after being withdrawn from Lelekovka. Further north, 3rd Panzer Division was also able to hold its positions despite constant Soviet pressure. Reinforced by parts of 282nd Infantry Division, withdrawn from its position further northeast and sent to help restore the front line west of Kirovograd, 3rd Panzer Division was in almost constant action, launching repeated counterattacks to halt the Soviet thrusts. Fighting gradually died down in the middle of January as both sides took stock.

The Germans regarded the battle as a defensive success. Despite the near-disaster at Kirovograd when three divisions were briefly encircled, they had managed to stop Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front from achieving a breakthrough and had inflicted heavy losses on the attacking Soviet formations. The claims submitted by the German divisions highlight the difficulties in assessing the outcomes of battles such as the fighting around Kirovograd – it was estimated that a total of 490 Soviet tanks and assault guns had been destroyed, but this would have accounted for almost all of the Soviet armour deployed in the fighting. What was beyond question was the price that had been paid by the Germans for their 'success'. The panzergrenadier battalions of 3rd Panzer Division were barely at the strength of single companies, and perhaps equally important was the loss of several experienced commanders – numerical strength could to some extent be restored, but Germany was running out of battle-hardened, experienced leaders.[25] Soviet claims of enemy losses were as exaggerated as German claims – Konev wrote that his armies accounted for 293 German tanks and assault guns.[26] Given that none of the German units involved in the fighting were anywhere near their establishment strength at the outset of the battle, this seems highly unlikely.

Regardless of casualties suffered and inflicted, the true legacy of the Soviet Kirovograd Operation was that the German Eighth Army's positions further north now formed a dangerous salient with its apex on the Dnepr at Kanev. To the northwest of this salient was a Soviet salient extending in the opposite direction, where Vatutin's forces had been engaged in ongoing costly fighting as Fourth Panzer Army attempted to hold its positions. Manstein's attempts to release sufficient forces for a decisive counterattack were constantly frustrated by Hitler's refusal to countenance abandoning any territory and the need to use formations like *Grossdeutschland* against Soviet attacks elsewhere. Carefully juggling the limited resources available to them, Manstein, Hube and Raus made plans for a relatively limited concentric attack against the Soviet bulge, assigning the codename *Watutin* – the German spelling of Vatutin's name – to their operation.

Throughout this period, Manstein's struggle with Hitler continued. The commander of Army Group South had repeatedly insisted that the only way to prevent collapse of his command was to create a powerful army on his left flank near Rovno (now Rivne). In order to create this army, he intended to pull troops from his southeast flank and to shorten the line in that region, including withdrawing Seventeenth Army from Crimea. This latter formation was outside his command and belonged to Army Group A, but Manstein's argument was operationally correct – regardless of the precise chain of command of German forces in Ukraine, the persisting danger of Fourth Panzer Army being outflanked to the north created a constant threat to the integrity of the entire German front line on the Eastern Front. Manstein later wrote that Zeitzler was in complete agreement, but Hitler refused repeatedly to contemplate such major withdrawals, as this was completely contrary to his plan for stubborn resistance in the east while waiting to deal a killing blow to any invasion in the west. From Hitler's perspective, every occasion that he had given permission for tactical or operational withdrawals had not been followed by the promised stabilisation of the front line, and his trust in such requests was clearly at an end. In a clear sign of the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the two men, Manstein wrote to Hitler to protest that it was impossible to continue under the current circumstances where there was no clear operational objective other than to hold onto all territory at all costs:

> If any leadership is to be successful, it must be based on a harmonious coordination of policy at all levels, which is dependent on clear directives from the top and a unanimous appreciation of the situation obtaining on the enemy's side. The army group cannot merely think from one day to the next. It cannot make do with a directive to hold on regardless when at the very same time it sees the enemy preparing to force the issue by an outflanking movement which it has no means of opposing.
>
> I must therefore request *OKH* either to accept the army group's views on the basis of the appreciations already submitted or else to refute them by passing down its own appreciation of future developments.[27]

The opening sentence of this quotation is a close paraphrasing of the principles laid down in the 19th century by Helmuth von Moltke, the father of the German General Staff; the entire ethos of the German Army was founded upon the principle that subordinates understood and agreed with the intentions of their superiors and were thus able to improvise if necessary in order to help achieve those intentions. But whilst Manstein and other German officers had benefited from years of training in thinking in such a manner, the man who now commanded Germany had no such training or experience, and was increasingly open in his contempt of professional officers who assured him that withdrawals would be followed by counterattacks that would stabilise the situation, but then either failed to deliver those counterattacks or requested yet more withdrawals. Manstein cannot have been surprised when this message too was ignored.

CHAPTER 3

WATUTIN AND THE CHERKASSY-KORSUN ENCIRCLEMENT

History tends to give victors the right to name battles. In many cases – Stalingrad, Berlin, Verdun – the choice is obvious. In other cases the choice may be a little more obscure. After the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815, Marshal Gebhard Blücher, who commanded the Prussian forces in the great battle in Belgium, suggested that the name of the nearest village – La Belle Alliance – was an appropriate title for the victory that had been won by the soldiers of Britain and Prussia, but the Duke of Wellington insisted on selecting the name 'Waterloo', even though the village of Waterloo lay several miles away.

In Soviet accounts, the battle that erupted immediately southwest of the Dnepr shortly after the Soviet recapture of Kirovograd has always been known as the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation, named after the town of that name in the immediate battlefield. German accounts always refer to the episode as the Battle of Cherkassy, even though the town of Cherkassy lay behind Soviet lines throughout the fighting. Perhaps because the Soviet Union was regarded as an enemy during the 1950s when German accounts of the battle were written and western historians became more aware of the details, and perhaps because the larger town of Cherkassy is easier to find on maps than Korsun-Shevchenkovsky, the German name has generally been preferred in the western world – a small example of how the German narrative dominated English-language accounts of the Eastern Front.

Konev, Rotmistrov and Zhadov all wrote about the fighting at Kirovograd as a substantial victory, but the reality was that 2nd Ukrainian Front succeeded in advancing perhaps a maximum of only 20 miles (33km) at a substantial cost.

Nevertheless, combined with the advances made by Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front in December and January, the outcome was that the Germans now held a dangerous salient between the two Soviet groupings. At its base, this salient was about 70 miles (113km) wide, and it was inevitable that the Red Army would turn its attention to this area. The salient threatened the inner flanks of 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts and considerably constrained their freedom of action; there were also fears in higher Soviet circles that while the salient remained in existence, the Germans might use it as a base from which to attempt to restore their line along the Dnepr, as Konev later wrote:

> Hitler's headquarters and the command of Army Group South were hoping that, with the current thaw, the Soviet troops would not be able to advance on the same scale as before, and therefore hoped to get a breather in the southern sector of their Eastern Front. During this period, the enemy still believed that he would be able to push our troops back to the Dnepr with strong attacks and retain the rich industrial and agricultural areas of right-bank Ukraine and establish land communications with Crimea, allowing them to regroup their forces. Hitler took every measure to retain right-bank Ukraine. He was well aware that its loss would shatter the entire German strategic front …
>
> The Nazis were in a hurry to create a sustainable defence in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky salient, which would ensure the retention of the entire position and would serve as a starting point for offensive operations.[1]

Such thoughts had also been aired by Hitler, and it is possible that the Führer's views were reported back to Moscow. Whilst the degree to which Stalin relied on the extensive 'Lucy' network is open to question, the intelligence received from 'Lucy' and other sources continued to provide the Soviet leadership with a far more accurate picture of German intentions than the Germans had of Soviet intentions. The reality was that Germany no longer had the resources for such an offensive operation. Nevertheless, the salient was seen to be a considerable threat, and in addition to gaining freedom from flank threats for the Red Army's forces, the elimination of the salient – in particular, the encirclement and destruction of the German forces within it – would constitute a major setback for the Germans. If Vatutin and Konev were to attack towards each other, it was surely possible for them to cover the modest distance required to cut off a substantial group of German units.

Zhukov later wrote that he started looking at such an operation when he returned to Vatutin's headquarters at the end of the Kirovograd fighting. On

11 January, he reported to *Stavka* with preliminary plans for a convergent attack; the following day, Stalin gave his blessing and planning began in earnest.[2] Zhukov returned to Ukraine and discussed matters with the two Front commanders. Konev in particular was enthusiastic about the proposal, and told Zhukov that he believed that most of the German Eighth Army was in the salient – the destruction of this force, which his headquarters estimated as numbering over 100,000 men, would be a setback for the Wehrmacht comparable to Stalingrad, as a *Stavka* staff officer recorded:

> The German Eighth Army under General Wöhler is in the salient near Kanev. It has no fewer than nine of the Wehrmacht's best motorised divisions as well as a division of the *Waffen-SS* and the *Wallonien* motorised brigade. Another Stalingrad is in the making.[3]

When the Red Army encircled Stalingrad, there was considerable surprise at the number of Germans who were trapped; on this occasion, Soviet assessments were also faulty. Estimates of the number of men who could be encircled, the number of German tanks in the area, and the number of divisions these men represented were all wide of the mark. In some respects, there was a tendency to overestimate German combat strength, both in terms of formations and equipment; on the other hand, the relative paucity of Red Army rear area units led to underestimates of the numbers of German personnel in such formations. As it retreated towards the west, the Wehrmacht constantly found the area behind the immediate front line was full of non-combatant bodies, military, paramilitary and non-military, all answering to different chains of command. Organising the timely withdrawal of these bodies was almost impossible, and Soviet intelligence often appeared to regard the personnel of these units as being the same as combatants. German commanders would have been delighted if even half of these men had been available for combat.

Previous Soviet plans had frequently outlined exploitation far into the depths of enemy-held territory, in keeping with longstanding Red Army doctrine; for example, the planning for the Kirovograd attack had outlined possible advances continuing far to the west. But such plans were conspicuously absent from the proposals drawn up by Zhukov and his subordinates to deal with the German salient around Korsun. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, all of the commanders would have been aware that the forces available were far from establishment strength after almost continuous fighting since the summer of 1943. Secondly, the Germans had carried out widespread destruction in central

Ukraine during their retreat to and over the Dnepr and the Red Army was faced with considerable logistical difficulties in bringing forward supplies and reinforcements, with the result that supporting deep penetrations would be almost impossible. Thirdly, the weather in the region could be expected to fluctuate either side of freezing – if it remained above zero for any length of time, the roads would rapidly deteriorate, adding to supply and communications difficulties. Fourthly, attempts to exploit initial successes after the encirclement of Stalingrad had led to a series of setbacks, culminating in Manstein's counteroffensive that restored the German line along the Donets, and Zhukov probably chose not to run the risk of succumbing once more to operational greed. Fifthly, the reduction of the Stalingrad pocket had proved to be far harder than the Red Army had expected, and if a large encirclement was created around Korsun, the Red Army intended to ensure that sufficient resources were available to crush it before the Germans could organise a relief attempt, which inevitably reduced the forces available for deeper exploitation.[4] Finally, operating on a very tight planning timetable, the Red Army put all its efforts into planning the encirclement rather than considering further options – the destruction of the salient and the German forces within it would be a substantial victory.

Meanwhile, the Germans continued preparations for *Watutin*, intended to reduce the threat to the northwest side of the German salient. In the second week of January, the leading elements of 1st Ukrainian Front's First Tank Army succeeded in capturing the towns of Illintsi and Lipovets, and were only nine miles (15km) from the eastern outskirts of the city of Vinnitsa and the Southern Bug. Manstein's headquarters was a short distance north of the city in a forest, where Hitler had established a command centre earlier in the war. In keeping with his slightly ridiculous taste for dramatic names for his headquarters – the *Adlerhorst* ('eagle's eyrie') in the Taunus mountains, the *Bärenhöhle* ('bear's cave') near Smolensk, the *Felsennest* ('rocky eyrie') near the Belgian border, the *Wolfsschlucht* ('wolf's gorge') in northern France, and the *Wolfsschanze* ('wolf's lair') in East Prussia – the Führer had assigned the codename *Werwolf* ('Werewolf') to this headquarters in Ukraine. The complex was built in early 1942 by forced labourers from prisoner of war camps, and in order to keep the location of the headquarters secret, most of the workers were executed on Hitler's orders once construction was complete.[5] The site was close to the intended route of a planned road highway that would run from Germany to Crimea – the latter was regarded by many Nazis as the ancestral home of the Gothic tribes, and was therefore given particular prominence in the intended shape of post-war Europe. In addition to some bunkers and a number of simple wooden buildings, the complex was encircled by extensive defensive positions and included a cinema, bathhouse, sauna, swimming pool and even bottled air in case there was a poison gas attack.[6] Despite the scale of the complex, Hitler only used it from July to late October 1942, perhaps a month in early 1943, and two weeks the following autumn. Manstein's Army Group South moved into the *Werwolf* site a couple of weeks after Hitler departed in mid-September 1943 and concluded that its extensive communications systems, the local rail and road networks, and the proximity of a substantial Luftwaffe base at Kalinovka made it an ideal location. Those road and rail links now made it a tempting target for Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front. As they advanced, the Red Army's soldiers came across segments of the highway to Crimea that had been completed, together with the remains of the labour camps where Jews and others had been kept while they worked on the roads; in many cases, they also found the mass graves of workers who had either become too weak to continue labouring, or had been killed prior to the arrival of the Red Army.

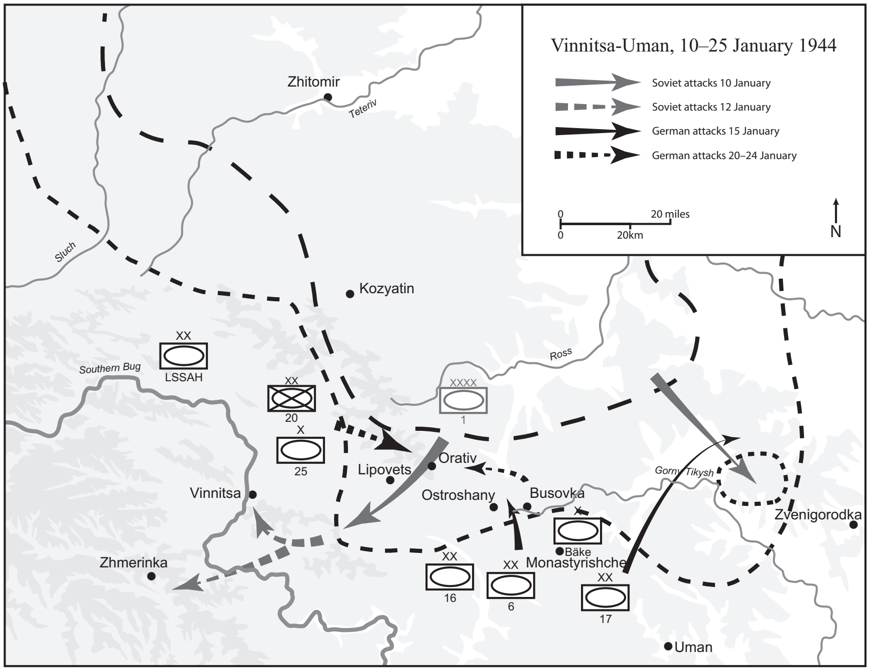
Manstein's original thinking regarding the planned counterattack to pinch off the Soviet salient projecting southwest from the Kiev region had been rather more ambitious, but Hitler's refusal to permit withdrawals meant that it was impossible to release sufficient troops for such a major operation, and other units like *Grossdeutschland* were unavailable due to emergencies in other sectors. Instead, *Watutin* would concentrate on breaking up the tip of the salient. Nevertheless, Manstein repeatedly made clear in his communications to *OKH* that he regarded *Watutin* as just the first part of a vital rebalancing of his front, with forces shifting steadily to the west. If Hitler saw these comments, he simply ignored them.

On 10 January, General Mikhail Efimovich Katukov's First Tank Army, which had been heavily involved in fighting around Kozyatyn, to the southeast of Berdichev, attempted to reach the Southern Bug south of Vinnitsa. When plans didn't unfold as intended, generals on both sides tended to write extensively in their memoirs about the difficulties under which they operated, and this was no exception:

> The winter in Ukraine in 1944 was unusually capricious. There would be thick fog and the roads would freeze, then heavy snowstorms. Our supply lines stretched back for 200km [120 miles]. The technical services had not yet completed the recovery of the tanks stranded in the Kozyatyn area and dozens of vehicles were awaiting recovery elsewhere. The airfields were far to the rear and unfavourable weather prevented us from relying on air support. Parts of Thirty-Eighth Army [which accompanied First Tank Army in this attack] couldn't keep up, exposing our flanks.[7]

The Soviet spearheads reached and overran a railway station in the southeast part of Vinnitsa, capturing a train of German troops, but with the average strength of his tank brigades down to perhaps 12 vehicles, Katukov knew he lacked the strength to try to penetrate into the city. Two brigades pushed on to the west past the southern outskirts of Vinnitsa, and approached Zhmerinka beyond the upper reaches of the Southern Bug River. Here, they witnessed an extraordinary moment. The territory to the west of the Southern Bug at this point had been assigned by Hitler to Romania in 1941 and Romanian border guards were on duty at the main crossing over the river. When retreating German troops attempted to reach the west bank, the border guards stopped them and a firefight broke out between the two sides, brought to a hasty end by the arrival of the Soviet tanks.[8] The following morning, the Soviet 1st Guards Tank Brigade moved into the town, but a determined German counterattack drove them out.

While Katukov attempted to regroup his units and his engineers struggled to repair sufficient tanks to restore his formations to a respectable level of strength, *Watutin* got under way, with German forces attacking from the southeast. It is a


Vinnitsa-Uman, 10–25 January 1944
Soviet attacks 10 January
Soviet attacks 12 January
German attacks 15 January
German attacks 20–24 January
0
20 miles
0
20km
N
Zhitomir
Teteriv
Sluch
Kozyatin
XX
LSSAH
Southern Bug
XX
20
X
25
XXXX
1
Ross
Orativ
Lipovets
Vinnitsa
Ostroshany
Busovka
Gorny Tikysh
Zvenigorodka
X
Bäke
XX
16
XX
6
Monastyrishche
XX
17
Zhmerinka
Uman

measure of the weakened state of the German units involved that, in some cases, units were 'loaned' by one division to another in order to create sufficient strength for the coming attack. For example, 6th Panzer Division had been in constant combat through the winter and like all German panzer divisions it rarely had more than a dozen tanks available. On 15 January, the division's 4th Panzergrenadier Regiment was subordinated to 17th Panzer Division, and under the aegis of General Hermann Breith's III Panzer Corps, the combined force – in reality, little more than a battlegroup – pushed forward into Busovka and Ostroshany but then encountered determined Soviet counterattacks and found itself cut off. The situation rapidly became disordered, as a German staff officer with 16th Panzer Division, also joining the attack, recalled:

> We drove into Leskovo, close to Monastyryshche. A chaotic situation lay before us. Several enemy groups were encircled, but so too was one of ours. The two panzergrenadier regiments [of 16th Panzer Division] attacked to break through and cut through this Gordian knot. The troops had no rest. Swiftly replenished, they were thrown into one operation after another. It was unbelievable how much material we left to fall into enemy hands during our retreats, because it was so cumbersome to move. Reports to higher commands became increasingly little more than propaganda and mere posturing … The attack by the grenadier regiments made only slow progress on 19 January, and we heard desperate requests for help over the radio from the battlegroup encircled in Ostroshany.[9]

The embattled German battlegroup was reached on 20 January. Oberstleutnant Franz Bäke, commander of 6th Panzer Division's 11th Panzer Regiment, was now ordered to take command of a new battlegroup consisting of 47 Panther tanks from 23rd Panzer Regiment and 34 Tiger tanks from *Schwere Panzerabteilung 503*, together with a battalion of self-propelled artillery. This powerful force, collectively named *Schwere Panzer Regiment Bäke*, now fell upon the depleted ranks of the Soviet forces in the area and made rapid progress. Bäke later claimed to have destroyed 268 Soviet tanks and assault guns and 156 artillery pieces; as with many wartime claims, this is almost certainly an exaggeration, and Katukov's First Tank Army would have been delighted to have so many vehicles available.[10] Nevertheless, the Soviet units suffered heavy casualties, as the men of 17th Panzer Division saw when they moved forward along the same road a few days later:

> The sky was grey, and there was a thaw. The main road was littered with corpses. Beyond Ivachny, where the rear area columns were jammed, the toll

> of dead Russians rose further. Columns of prisoners marched towards us, shot-up tanks burned everywhere, and further afield [we could see] burning villages. On either side the enemy still held on, in some cases badly battered, in other cases not. Guns and rocket-launchers were firing, and Stalin Organs [*Katyusha* rocket launchers] replied. An endless line of half-tracks and heavy weapons pushed forward along the road.[11]

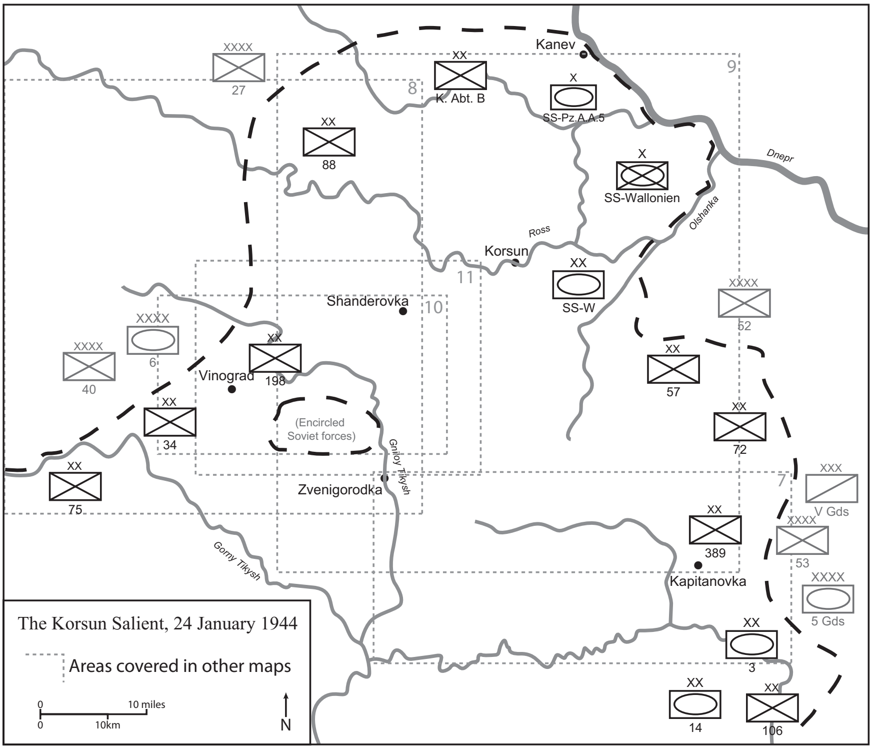
At the same time as the attack by III Panzer Corps from the southeast, other German forces attacked from the west, striking from positions immediately east and northeast of Vinnitsa. This part of the operation was conducted by General Hans Gollnick's XLVI Panzer Corps, and the original intention was to have the SS division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* (usually abbreviated to *LSSAH*) in the attack, but this proved to be impossible. *LSSAH* had returned to the Eastern Front the previous autumn and had spent the winter as part of XLVIII Panzer Corps, steadily being ground down in the process; at a conference on 22 January, the division's officers told Manstein that it would be impossible for them to reach XLVI Panzer Corps in time for the planned attack on 24 January:

> [Manstein] took the following position: for the army group, the speedy completion of its planned operations was of utmost importance. His reason was that the enemy had powerful tank forces poised in front of Fourth Panzer Army's left flank, west of Berdichev. We could expect these forces would soon move south again, bypassing Vinnitsa towards the previous Russian objective of Shmerinka. In order to oppose this attack successfully, it would be necessary to reassign large parts of First Panzer Army to Fourth Panzer Army after the completion of *Watutin*. The risk to the army group lay in the fact that the units involved in that operation, particularly the SS panzer forces, would need to be freed up rapidly. It thus all came down to a question of rapidity.[12]

Accordingly, the attack commenced on 24 January as Manstein stipulated, using a battlegroup from 25th Panzer Division and 20th Panzergrenadier Division. The assault made good progress. The elements of *LSSAH* struggled along poor roads to their new area of operations and joined the assault as planned on the second day, hindered more by difficulties in bringing forward supplies than by Soviet defences. Supply convoys reported frequent encounters with Red Army stragglers, requiring the division to assign armoured vehicles to function as 'convoy protection'. Having started the operation far from full strength, *LSSAH* reported at the end of 28 January that its tank strength had fallen to just four Tigers, nine Panthers, 16 Pz.IVs and 16 assault guns.[13]

The two German forces met near the town of Orativ, effectively amputating the tip of Vatutin's salient. Much of Katukov's First Tank Army had already withdrawn, as had its supporting infantry units from Thirty-Eighth Army. Soviet accounts by the generals involved barely mention the German counterattack, but there can be little doubt that the operation was a setback for the Red Army. However, not all of the Soviet troops who were cut off by the counterattack were eliminated. A particularly large group was isolated by 17th Panzer Division between Vinograd and Zvenigorodka, and would play a part in the forthcoming Soviet operation. The German operation had been a modest success, but the most skilful tactical victory is of little value unless it is part of a larger operation, and makes the success of that operation more likely. Similarly, operational successes like *Watutin* were of little value to Manstein in the absence of an overreaching strategic objective that would change the course of the fighting. In particular, in the absence of Manstein's planned shift of the centre of gravity of his army group further to the west, the danger of Soviet forces thrusting down towards the south and potentially isolating the entire army group was only reduced temporarily.

Throughout this fighting, preparations continued for the Red Army's attack on the Korsun salient. Deliberately limiting their ambition, Stalin and Zhukov issued orders on 12 January to the two Fronts, requiring them to make attacks that would meet at Zvenigorodka. In keeping with what had now become standard Soviet practice, the attacks would not begin on the same date; this policy had been used with great success in the past, leading to the Germans deploying their limited reserves to deal with the initial Soviet attack, only to have a new attack erupt elsewhere. Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front would make the first attack on 24 January. A day later, Vatutin would attack from the northwest, linking up with the encircled Soviet troops south of Vinograd before advancing further. After infantry units had broken the German defences, each Front would use a tank army to drive into the salient. In the middle of winter, with long supply lines stretching across the devastated region of central Ukraine, preparing for the new operation in just two weeks was a tough demand, but there was a widespread belief in Soviet circles that the Germans might realise the danger to their positions and withdraw from the salient – indeed, Manstein, Wöhler and Hube had all made this very suggestion on more than one occasion, only to be overruled by Hitler. Despite the limited preparation time, Zhukov expected the encirclement to be completed within


XXXX
27
8
XX
K. Abt. B
Kanev
X
SS-Pz.A.A.5
9
XX
88
X
SS-Wallonien
Dnepr
Olshanka
Ross
Korsun
XX
SS-W
11
Shanderovka
10
XXXX
52
XXXX
6
XXXX
40
XX
198
Vinograd
XX
57
XX
34
(Encircled Soviet forces)
Gniloy Tikysh
XX
72
XX
75
Zvenigorodka
7
XXX
V Gds
XX
389
XXXX
53
Gorny Tikysh
Kapitanovka
XXXX
5 Gds
XX
3
XX
14
XX
106
Areas covered in other maps
0
10 miles
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10km
N

The Korsun Salient, 24 January 1944

three days at most, with the trapped German troops then being overwhelmed in a further four days.

Almost inevitably, Zhukov's preparation timetable proved to be too ambitious and the beginning of the operation had to be postponed to 25 January. Konev briefed his subordinates on 15 January, outlining how he proposed to attack the German lines north of Kirovograd. He later wrote that it would have been his preference to use the tried and trusted units of Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army and Shumilov's Seventh Guards Army to lead the assault, but two constraints made it impossible to carry out the necessary redeployment. The first was of course the tight timetable of preparations. The second was that the formations of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army would have to relocate a substantial distance, and to add the units of two infantry armies moving in a similar direction at the same time was beyond the capacity of the badly degraded road and rail networks, even if time had been available. Besides, such a wholesale redeployment of 2nd Ukrainian Front could not fail to be noticed by the Germans – it would be hard enough to camouflage the movements of Rotmistrov's tanks. Unable to use his preferred infantry armies, Konev intended to use Fourth Guards Army in the first wave of his attack and much of the need to delay the start date by a day was because Major General Alexander Ivanovich Ryzhov, the army commander, requested additional time to allow his units to move into position and to reconnoitre the defences that they would have to overcome. Supported by Fifty-Third Army, Fourth Guards Army was to attack on a front of just 11 miles (19km), supported by a dense concentration of artillery. In keeping with Red Army doctrine, the original plan required Fifth Guards Tank Army's units to be held back until the German line had been breached, but it was clear that the two armies in the first wave would need tank support to achieve their breakthrough. It was usual practice for several independent tank units to be assigned to infantry armies for this purpose, but the losses suffered during the winter meant that Konev had no such units available; consequently, some of Rotmistrov's tanks would support the initial attack, just as they had at Kirovograd.[14]

In accordance with these plans, Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army was pulled out of line near Kirovograd and moved to an area behind the lines of Fifty-Third Army. Every attempt was made to hide this deployment from the Germans, with extensive use of dummy tanks and misleading radio signals, but the redeployment of so many men and machines could not be completely hidden. Wherever possible, troops moved by night, but – partly through poor radio security – the Germans became aware of the redeployment of Fifth Guards Tank Army on 21 January. Anticipating a major attack, the German 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions were moved north to cover the Soviet force and *SS-Wiking*, currently stationed within the Korsun salient, was ordered to prepare an armoured battlegroup for redeployment at short notice. The weather had turned milder, adding to the problems faced by the Red Army, as Konev described:

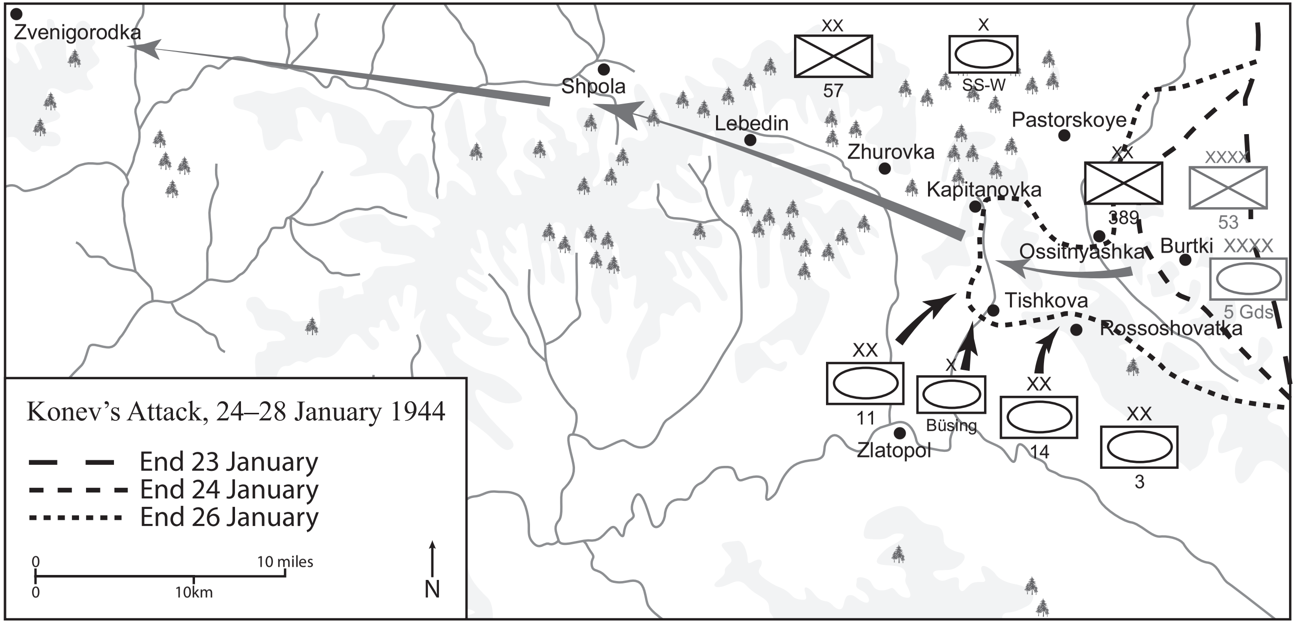
> The weather greatly hampered our movements, and these movements were vital. The dirt roads could not withstand any heavy use. In places it was impossible to move even with oxen. It was muddy away from the road – this is generally a seasonal phenomenon in Ukraine. But even the poor-quality roads had been badly degraded by the troops with their tanks and tractors, and there were too few powerful vehicles. The troops experienced similar difficulties crossing ridges and ravines, which were in abundance. Not only artillery and vehicles, but tractors pulling engineering equipment and ammunition and even tanks sometimes got stuck.[15]

By the eve of the operation, reinforcements in the shape of new and repaired tanks had raised the strength of Rotmistrov's army to 197 tanks and assault guns, barely half its establishment strength. The Soviet infantry units were also in poor shape – Ryzhov's army had seven infantry divisions, but collectively they fielded just 46,000 men instead of their collective establishment of about 80,000.[16] Vatutin's forces to the northwest were in no better shape. His Front would attack with Fortieth and Twenty-Seventh Armies. The armoured exploitation would be carried out by the new Sixth Tank Army under the command of General Andrei Grigorovich Kravchenko, and once again it was necessary to deploy some of the tank units with the initial infantry attack in order to ensure success. This was a new tank army and had only two of the three tank or mechanised corps its establishment required, and the haste of preparation meant that it would go into action without a full complement of headquarters staff. Kravchenko, who had been appointed to command the new army, was also commander of V Guards Tank Corps, part of the army. His force had 190 tanks and assault guns, again far less than its establishment strength. By this stage of the war, Soviet tank factories were producing increasing numbers of the upgraded version of the T-34; as previously mentioned, it was equipped with a more powerful 85mm gun and was capable of dealing with both Tiger tanks and Panthers, though generally only at close range.

The German forces in the salient were far from the numbers that the Red Army estimated, at least in terms of combatants. On paper, the units looked formidable. Immediately south of the area where Konev would attack was Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps, still recovering from the Kirovograd battles. To its north was General Wilhelm Stemmermann's XI Corps, with General Franz Mattenklott's XLII Corps in the tip of the salient. Finally, facing Vatutin's Front was General Ernst-Eberhard Hell's VII Corps, part of First Panzer Army. Between them, these units had eight infantry divisions and three panzer divisions, including *SS-Wiking*. In addition, *SS-Panzergrenadier-Brigade Wallonien* was subordinated to *SS-Wiking*, sandwiched between the main body of the SS division and *SS-Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 5* ('SS 5th Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion', part of *SS-Wiking*), and the remnants of three infantry divisions had been organised into *Korps Abteilung B* under Generalleutnant Theodor Lieb. Collectively, these units consisted of about 125,000 men and 100 tanks and assault guns. Compared to battles fought elsewhere on the Eastern Front, the difference between the two sides was not great, and although the Soviet air units fielded more planes than the Luftwaffe, the weather would restrict activity by both sides. By far the greatest difference was in artillery. As was now customary, the Red Army had massed an overwhelming weight of artillery firepower to aid the initial attack.

Konev's Front made energetic reconnaissance probes on 24 January, and in some areas secured sizeable penetrations. Inevitably, these attacks, together with increased aerial reconnaissance activity, left the Germans with no doubt that a major assault was coming. The outposts of the German 389th Infantry Division fell back a distance of about two miles in places; much of this was the abandonment of outposts that would be hard to defend, but other withdrawals were forced by the strength of the Red Army's reconnaissance in force, which attempted both to identify German strongpoints and to secure appropriate jumping-off lines for the main attack. In keeping with Soviet practice, the main weight of the attack was intended to fall on the seam between the German XI Corps and XLVII Panzer Corps in the expectation that, once they were forced out of their positions, the two formations would retreat on diverging axes. As reports of the Soviet probing attacks continued to accumulate, Stemmermann ordered *SS-Wiking* to send its armoured battlegroup to cover the sector.

Other steps were also taken to forestall a Soviet attack. German reconnaissance flights had identified probable Soviet forming-up areas and these were subjected to artillery and air attacks. Wöhler also alerted Generalleutnant Theodor Busse, Manstein's chief of staff, to the developments, correctly concluding that the Red Army's reconnaissance operations included the clearance of minefields and barbed wire in order to take up favourable positions for a major assault. During the afternoon, the *SS-Wiking* battlegroup and a reserve battalion of 389th Infantry Division launched counterattacks to drive the Soviet reconnaissance groups out of the village of Burtki, which had fallen to the Red Army during the morning. Stemmermann was of course relieved when news arrived that the village had been retaken, but he was also aware that he had committed almost all of the reserves available, both at a local level and from his corps, and if this was merely the prelude to the main Soviet attack, it was highly unlikely that his lines would be able to hold firm. As pressure continued into the evening and night, he ordered 57th Infantry Division, some 12 miles (20km) to the north, to release a battalion to be available as a reserve. He must have known that a single understrength battalion with perhaps 400 men was unlikely to be able to achieve very much in the face of a major assault. Alarmingly, the Soviet troops waited until the *SS-Wiking* battlegroup, commanded by Surmbannführer Hans Köller, moved on to deal with another penetration and then drove the German infantry out of Burtki again. Stemmermann sent increasingly urgent messages to the headquarters of



Konev's Attack, 24–28 January 1944

End 23 January
End 24 January
End 26 January
0
10 miles
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10km
N
Zvenigorodka
Shpola
Lebedin
Zhurovka
Kapitanovka
Pastorskoye
Ossitnyashka
Burtki
Tishkova
Rossoshovatka
Zlatopol
XX
57
X
SS-W
XX
389
XXXX
53
XXXX
5 Gds
XX
11
X
Büsing
XX
14
XX
3

Eighth Army, stating that counterattacks from the south would be required if a Soviet attack developed. For the moment, there was concern in German circles, but no sense of crisis: 3rd, 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions would be available for a counterattack should one be necessary, and such a force, despite being far from establishment strength, would surely suffice.

All of Stemmermann's fears were realised before dawn on 25 January when Konev's massed artillery subjected the German lines to a heavy bombardment. Positions identified by Soviet reconnaissance flights and during the preceding day's fighting were heavily hit. On the southern flank of 389th Infantry Division the shelling was particularly effective, forcing the German soldiers to abandon their line as soon as it came under pressure, the Soviet attackers making excellent use of cover provided by patches of thick fog. The German unit to the south of 389th Infantry Division was 3rd Panzer Division, now under the command of Oberst Rudolf Lang; Vormann ordered the division to launch an immediate attack towards the north, but the panzer division had its hands full as it was under heavy attack itself. By the end of the day, Lang had been forced to pull back his left flank and a gap had opened up between 3rd Panzer Division and 389th Infantry Division.

With its reserve battalion committed the previous day, and with its line having been driven back at Burtki, 389th Infantry Division was in a vulnerable state and it soon felt the full weight of the Soviet attack as three divisions pressed forward against its depleted ranks. Konev had compressed his attack to a narrow frontage, but this was a mixed blessing; his troops came under heavy artillery fire from German guns and suffered major losses as they advanced. Intense machine-gun fire from 389th Infantry Division's thinned ranks added to the heavy toll. The village of Ossitnyashka was the scene of particularly bitter fighting, and in an attempt to restore the situation Stemmermann ordered *Kampfgruppe Köller* – the armoured battlegroup from *SS-Wiking* – to attack in mid-morning. As they probed forward, the SS troops ran into a group of Soviet tanks advancing in the opposite direction. A close-range engagement followed in which Köller's battlegroup claimed to have destroyed 13 T-34s without loss. The battalion released by 57th Infantry Division now arrived and took up positions alongside *Kampfgruppe Köller*, restoring the situation for the moment.[17]

Stemmermann reshuffled his forces as best he could, ordering 72nd Infantry Division to move south to the critical area, handing over its sector of the front line to neighbouring divisions. At the same time, Vormann dispatched 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions from the south, with the intention of striking into the southern flank of the Soviet attack. Throughout the day, the battalions of 72nd Infantry Division arrived in a steady stream but found themselves subjected to repeated attacks and were unable to establish contact with 389th Infantry Division's northern flank. Bitter fighting continued throughout the day as Soviet forces ground their way into Ossitnyashka while 14th Panzer Division concentrated its strength in and to the southeast of Kapitanovka. On the eve of the battle, the division had reported that its panzer regiment had just seven Pz.IVs, four assault guns and four flamethrower-equipped tanks available for action; its infantry and anti-tank battalions were also badly degraded, but it was now required to stand firm in the path of the weight of Konev's attack.[18] Labouring forward over badly rutted roads in thick patchy fog, the panzer division established contact with 3rd Panzer Division on its southern flank and what remained of 389th Infantry Division to its north, and moved into Kapitanovka during the afternoon of 25 January. In keeping with standard practice in panzer divisions, Unrein had organised his division into separate battlegroups. One such group, consisting of a battalion of panzergrenadiers, a battalion of artillery, the division's reconnaissance battalion, and a small group of anti-aircraft guns, collectively under the command of Major Heinz von Brese-Winiary, commander of one of the division's panzergrenadier regiments, took up position on the division's northern flank in Kapitanovka. A second, commanded by Oberstleutnant Werner Mummert, consisted largely of the second panzergrenadier regiment and an artillery battalion and was assigned to the right flank, where it would ensure that contact with 3rd Panzer Division remained intact. A third battlegroup was built around the remaining tanks of the division – an entire battalion was currently in the west being re-equipped with Panther tanks and would not return to the Eastern Front for several months – and was commanded by Oberst Willi Langkeit, the panzer regiment's commander.

Brese was able to establish contact with 389th Infantry Division in Kapitanovka but his positions came under heavy attack during the afternoon of 25 January. The dense fog in the area allowed the Soviet tanks and infantry to approach close to the German lines before they were detected and a fierce firefight erupted at close range with several Soviet tanks being destroyed. Rather than trying to batter the German positions head-on, the Soviet group turned to the south and surprised *Kampfgruppe Mummert*, overrunning the village of Rossoshovatka. Determined German counterattacks, reinforced by *Kampfgruppe Langkeit*, recovered the village that evening. Further north, 389th Infantry Division reported that its battalions had been reduced to fewer than 50 men each and several of its artillery batteries had been overrun by the Soviet assault, but Stemmermann and Wöhler were cautiously confident that once 11th Panzer Division arrived, the combined weight of three panzer divisions would be sufficient to restore the situation. In an attempt to reinforce 389th Infantry Division before it finally collapsed, further elements of 57th Infantry Division were also ordered to move south. But even as these reinforcements hurried south, passing behind the line taken up by 72nd Infantry Division, they ran into retreating stragglers from 389th Infantry Division in Pasterskoye, seven miles (12km) north of Kapitanovka. Even worse, the leading units of the Red Army were close behind and a confused encounter battle developed between the German reinforcements and Soviet tanks with mounted infantry. As darkness fell, the road from Pasterskoye to Kapitanovka was secured, but the line was held only by isolated strongpoints.[19]

By now, Stemmermann had ordered all of 57th Infantry Division to redeploy in the path of Konev's attack. Despite the pressing urgency of the situation, the paralysis imposed upon the German chain of command by Hitler ensured that there were delays in ordering this move; Stemmermann had to contact Busse at Army Group South's headquarters and await approval. Although Busse approved Stemmermann's request, he was aware of the risk that it involved. The divisions either side of 57th Infantry Division's sector – *SS-Wiking* to the north and 72nd Infantry Division to the south – would have to extend their front lines to fill the gap left by this withdrawal, at a time when 72nd Infantry Division was already fully committed on its southern flank and *SS-Wiking* was weakened by its armoured battlegroup being heavily involved in dealing with Konev's attack. Nevertheless, in the absence of reinforcements from elsewhere, Busse and Stemmermann had no choice but to take this risk.

Although the attempts by Konev's northern flank to break out past the northern outskirts of Kapitanovka had, for the moment at least, been blocked, the price that the Germans paid for this was that all of their reserves were now fully committed. Collectively, the battalions of 389th Infantry Division had started the day with fewer than 2,000 men in the front line, covering a front of about 12 miles (20km). These men were evaporating at an alarming rate and by the end of 25 January none of its battalions had even 100 men left in the front line and much of the division's artillery had been lost. Nevertheless, 11th Panzer Division was expected to join the battle shortly and Stemmermann and Wöhler still believed that, with three panzer divisions operating together, the situation was not desperate. To an extent, they underestimated the threat because they didn't immediately grasp the intentions of 2nd Ukrainian Front. The abiding fear in Army Group South, and in its subordinate armies, was that the Red Army would attempt to break through towards the south and pin part or all of the army group against the Black Sea, and this threat continued to influence German thinking, even though Konev's attack was about 150 miles (240km) north of the coast. Would Konev turn his forces to the south as the Germans both feared and expected, or would he continue towards the west, through and beyond Kapitanovka?

As had frequently been the case with the Red Army's assaults on German positions, the first day fell short of expectations. Konev had anticipated that he would be able to achieve a clear breakthrough, but the dogged defence by 389th Infantry Division prevented this. Furthermore, Soviet reconnaissance flights had spotted the movement of 14th Panzer Division even before its units clashed with the advancing Soviet troops and also reported that 11th Panzer Division was moving towards the area. That evening, Konev sent a signal to his subordinates criticising their performance, complaining particularly that Ryzhov's Fourth Guards Army had not used its artillery effectively against German strongpoints and had allowed itself to be held up by inferior forces. Ryzhov passed this criticism on to his subordinates, concentrating especially on the use of artillery.[20] There were other command failures too. Communications broke down between the headquarters of several divisions and their constituent regiments, leaving division commanders unable to make changes to plans once the attacks began on 25 January, and few senior commanders chose to improvise, for example by using messengers or setting up new lines of communication. Stalin and his senior officers might have had a less capricious attitude than Hitler towards their subordinates – officers were frequently given opportunities to learn from their mistakes – but ultimately, they would not tolerate repeated failure. Ryzhov had commanded a succession of units in the war – at its outset, he commanded a rifle division before leading no fewer than five armies, often for only brief periods – before taking command of Fourth Guards Army in early January 1944. He hadn't impressed the high command significantly in any of these posts, and there can be little doubt that, even by the end of the first day of the operation, another question mark had been placed beside his name.

Two of Rotmistrov's three tank corps had been warned that they might have to assist in the initial breakthrough and some of their elements had been in action on the first day of the battle; anxious that the operation was slipping behind schedule, Konev now ordered them to attack in strength in order to break the German line. Part of XXIX Tank Corps stormed Rossoshovatka before dawn on 26 January while the rest of the corps penetrated into Kapitanovka, and the Red Army's 5th Guards Airborne Division – deployed in a ground role – pushed back the southern flank of 72nd Infantry Division. Any hope that 14th Panzer Division would be able to stop the Soviet onslaught had disappeared by midday; *Kampfgruppe Mummert*, driven out of Rossoshovatka, managed to take up a line on high ground to the southwest and beat off all further attacks, but lost contact with the rest of the division. *Kampfgruppe von Brese* found itself effectively cut off in Kapitanovka, and *Kampfgruppe Langkeit*, reduced to just four battle-worthy tanks, could do nothing to restore the situation.

Bad news continued to arrive at Stemmermann's headquarters in an almost continuous stream. Köller's armoured battlegroup from *SS-Wiking* attempted to fight its way through to 14th Panzer Division from the north but was halted by a strong line of anti-tank guns – one of the lessons that the Red Army had learned from the previous winter was the importance of erecting such defences as quickly as possible in order to block the armoured counterattacks that were such a hallmark of Wehrmacht operations. Meanwhile, the southern flank of 72nd Infantry Division, unable to link up with the remnants of 389th Infantry Division, was under heavy pressure and Köller was ordered to give up his attempts to reach 14th Panzer Division and to move to support the hard-pressed infantry division. A small group of German infantry continued to cling on to the ruins of Ossitnyashka, to the east of Kapitanovka, but could do little more than send reports of the steady stream of Soviet troops bypassing them and pushing on to the west.

At this stage of the developing crisis, the Germans were hamstrung by another decision made by Hitler. The Führer summoned all army and army group commanders from the Eastern Front to a conference on 27 January, and in the absence of the army group commander, Stemmermann couldn't secure permission to pull back his entire corps to a shorter line and thus release sufficient troops to intercept Konev's forces. Manstein flew to Prussia the day before the conference, even as the fighting in and around Kapitanovka raged, leaving Wöhler and Busse to do what they could to manage the battle.

If Manstein and the other senior officers who gathered were expecting Hitler to unveil a new strategic vision, they were disappointed. Nor was this an opportunity for the sharing of ideas or suggestions. Accounts of this conference are inevitably dominated by the memoirs of the German army officers who attended, and given their pressing need to deal with crises on the battlefield, it is understandable that they regarded the conference as highly inconvenient at best, and an utterly irrelevant distraction from the problems they faced at worst. From Hitler's point of view, things looked rather different. Despite his directive stressing that the Eastern Front could no longer expect to be bailed out with reinforcements from elsewhere, he knew from his ongoing exchanges with Manstein that there remained an expectation in many headquarters that they could demand fresh troops to deal with their constant crises. Consequently, he now subjected his senior officers to a lecture on the importance of increasing National Socialist awareness in the army. In particular, given the difficulties that the soldiers faced, the Führer told them that it was vital that the men remained faithful and retained the will to fight on to victory. Whilst some of the officers present – men like Hube, for example – remained ardent enthusiasts of Hitler, others like Manstein were less impressed, particularly given that they had been summoned away from their command at a time when soldiers were fighting and dying, in order to be told that the will of the men had to be bolstered. When Hitler told the assembled officers that 'If the end should come one day, it should really be the field marshals and generals who stand by the flags to the last', Manstein couldn't accept such thinly veiled criticism in silence. Hitler repeated the statement, and Manstein retorted angrily, 'And so they will, *mein Führer*!'[21]

The interjection was sufficient to throw Hitler off his thread and the lecture came to an abrupt end. Later, Manstein was summoned to a meeting with Hitler and Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of *OKW*. Hitler bluntly told Manstein that he would not tolerate any such interruption in future. He went on to reject Manstein's repeated warnings about the threats to Army Group South as little more than an attempt by Manstein to ensure that these warnings were included in the Army Group South war diary. Manstein angrily rejected the assertion, pointing out that these had been personal letters and would not therefore feature in the diary. He then added:

> You must excuse me if I use an English expression in this connexion, but all I can say to your interpretation of my motives is that *I* am a gentleman.[22]

Relations between the two men were clearly at an all-time low.

Whilst the generals were en route to Prussia, small groups of Rotmistrov's tanks began to pass through the shredded German lines around Kapitanovka. By midday on 26 January, they were approaching Zhurovka, having bypassed the exposed flanks of 14th Panzer Division's forces in Kapitanovka. The troops of 11th Panzer Division were now beginning to arrive and, controlled directly by Eighth Army, they were ordered to strike north towards Kapitanovka where they would link up with 14th Panzer Division, and the two units would then drive on to restore the line to the north of Kapitanovka while the *SS-Wiking* armoured battlegroup, supported by elements of the infantry divisions fighting alongside it, would attempt to push south to meet 11th and 14th Panzer divisions. On paper, such a proposal seemed an appropriate reaction to the Soviet attack, but whether any of the allocated units had sufficient strength for the mission assigned to them was doubtful.

Even if Soviet reconnaissance and intelligence reports hadn't already identified the presence of the German armoured units, Konev and his subordinates knew what to expect, as Konev later wrote:

> From the experience of previous breakthrough operations, we knew that the Fascist German command would certainly try to cut off our attacking troops [by counterattacking] at the base of the breakthrough. Therefore, we had a deep operational deployment of Fourth and Fifty-Third Armies, and the tank army was advancing in two echelons, with two tank corps in the first echelon and one in the second. In addition, the Front had organised operational reserves.[23]

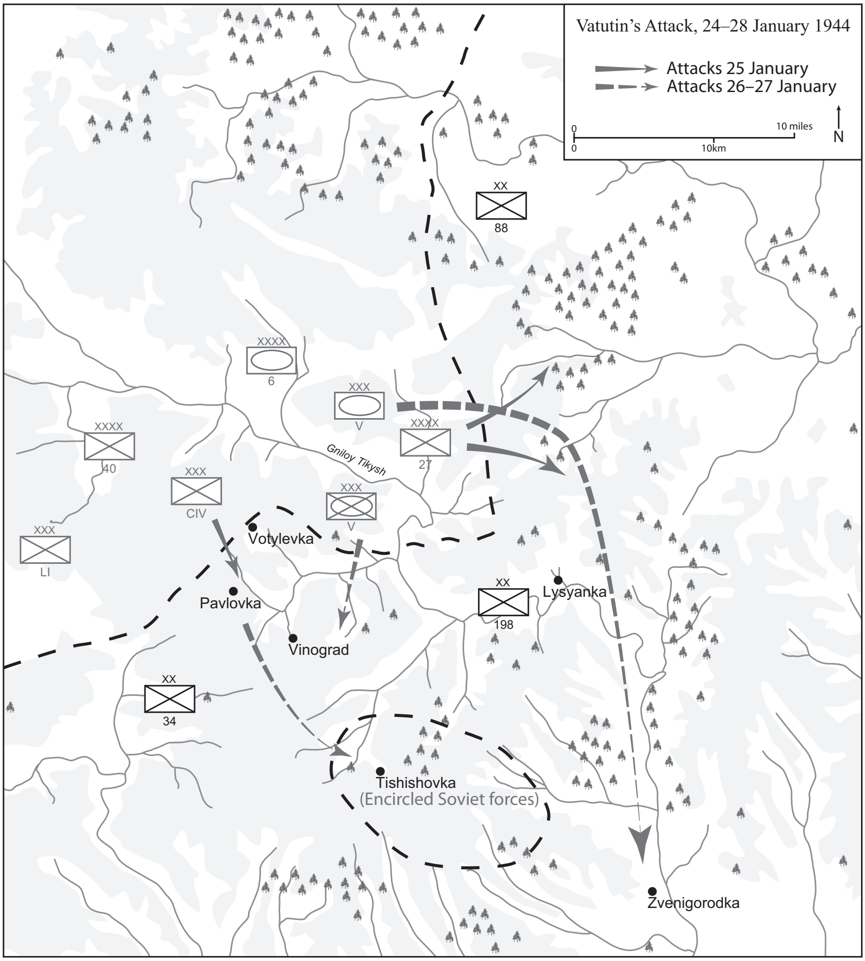
It is a striking feature of the fighting on the Eastern Front that, from the beginning of 1943, panzer divisions found it increasingly difficult to operate with the degree of operational freedom that they had hitherto enjoyed. Their successes – such as Manstein's counteroffensive of March 1943 – were largely achieved in disordered conditions where there were no formal front lines; in this sort of confused fighting, German tactical skill in 'encounter battles' remained dominant. But the Red Army had become skilled at rapidly deploying defensive lines of anti-tank guns – known to Germans as a *Pakfront* – which would coordinate their weapons in order to bring an attacking German force under heavy fire from all guns at the same moment. Entire battalions, brigades and regiments of anti-tank troops were available to be used in this role; when they were first organised, these units were often armed with obsolescent anti-tank rifles as there were insufficient larger anti-tank guns available, but this was increasingly remedied as the war progressed. In any case, anti-tank rifles remained effective weapons against half-tracks and even against tanks, particularly if used in built-up areas where gunners could fire at tanks from the upper floors of buildings, targeting the thinner upper decks of tanks at close range. These anti-tank units now took up positions to deal with the expected German counterattack.

The Germans had now identified the tank corps of Rotmistrov's army and Eighth Army headquarters informed Stemmermann that further columns of tanks had been spotted heading west towards the battered lines of XI Corps. In Manstein's absence, Wöhler was unable to grant permission for Stemmermann to pull back his corps as requested; a local withdrawal by the southern flank of 72nd Infantry Division would have to suffice. Nevertheless, both Stemmermann and Wöhler began to believe that the crisis had passed. The Soviet tanks that had slipped through to the west amounted to little more than a company or two, and a similar penetration a few weeks before had been eliminated by tanks from *SS-Wiking*. There had been far less Soviet artillery fire since dawn on 26 January and with 57th Infantry Division moving down from the north and two panzer divisions about to counterattack from the south, it should be possible to restore the line.

The mood of cautious optimism lasted until the late morning. As had been planned from the outset, Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front now attacked from the northwest. Just as Konev's attack had fallen on a seam between two German formations, Vatutin's troops struck at the boundary between First Panzer Army's XLII and VII Corps. As had been the case east of Kapitanovka, the Red Army was unable to hide its preparations and the Germans were aware by 23 January that a major attack was coming, when two Soviet regiments attacked to seize a small village from the Germans in order to secure favourable positions for the main assault. Radio intercepts and prisoner interrogations added the intelligence that a tank corps and a mechanised corps had moved into the area. Generalleutnant Lieb was currently the acting commander of XLII Corps in the absence of Mattenklott and in anticipation of the coming attack, he requested further anti-tank units. All that First Panzer Army could send him was a single battalion of infantry armed with *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapons.

Despite the clear signs of Soviet preparations, the Germans were not aware of the scale of what was coming. They had not yet identified the new Sixth Tank Army and concluded that the fresh units they had spotted were intended to attack to relieve the encircled elements of two rifle divisions and a motorised brigade, left isolated behind German lines in Tichonovka during the recent fighting. Even if the Red Army should apply pressure in this area, Hube's headquarters believed that First Panzer Army had sufficient resources to restore the situation. III Panzer Corps was bringing its operations further west to a close and would soon be available to be transferred *en masse* if required. Even when Vatutin's troops commenced a heavy artillery bombardment of the German lines on the morning of 26 January, this was perceived as nothing more than what had already been anticipated.

Like Konev's armies, Vatutin's formations were far from establishment strength and the Front commander decided to commit Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army alongside the initial infantry attack. As has already been described, the tank army was as weak as the armies that had been in constant action through the winter. Its mechanised corps was relatively strong, with about 150 tanks and assault guns, and would support the western flank of the attack; the tank corps had only 54 tanks and would operate on the eastern flank. The personnel of the tank army included large numbers of fresh recruits, many with only modest levels of training.


Vatutin's Attack, 24–28 January 1944
Attacks 25 January
Attacks 26–27 January
0
10 miles
0
10km
N
XX
88
XXXX
6
XXX
V
XXXX
27
XXXX
40
XXX
CIV
Gniloy Tikysh
XXX
V
XXX
LI
Votylevka
Pavlovka
Vinograd
XX
198
Lysyanka
XX
34
Tishishovka
(Encircled Soviet forces)
Zvenigorodka

The morning of Vatutin's attack saw thick fog across the entire battlefield. As the shelling died away and the men of the Soviet Fortieth Army struggled forward through the snow and churned up ground, they came under heavy fire from the soldiers of the German 34th and 198th Infantry Divisions. A battalion commander in 198th Infantry Division whose troops were stationed in and around the village of Votylevka later recalled the bombardment:

> At 4.40am on 26 January, a tremendous barrage came down on Votylevka, not only in our area but on a sector more than 30km [18 miles] in width. The Russians must have employed hundreds of batteries in the artillery preparation for their attack. Artillery shells of all calibres crashed into our positions. Waves of 122mm rockets added their howling cacophony too, before slamming into the earth around us. The enemy paid particular attention to the coordinating point where our division's lines joined those of our neighbour to the north, 88th Infantry Division. It was a major attack!
>
> We had only seconds to grab our weapons and clothes and to dive into a deep, narrow ditch which, as a precaution, we had dug behind our house and covered with wood beams, dirt, and a thick layer of straw. A few minutes later our cottage was already broken into pathetic pieces. From now on we could do nothing but crouch in our trench and hope. Just before leaping into the shelter, my Leutnant Armbruster got his hands on a bottle of cognac which, after the first seconds of shock were over, was soon passed around. Its contents helped deaden the terrific, pounding shock that went on and on and on.
>
> At 6am sharp, exactly 80 minutes later, the devastating barrage stopped suddenly … Dead silence prevailed!
>
> Knowing that the soldiers of the Red Army started their attack – with tactical correctness – right after the end of their preparatory barrage, we broke out into the open and saw that everything in Votylevka, with a very few exceptions, was razed to the ground. Even the few trees had become stripped skeletons. Only the remains of a couple of chimneys still stood in the smoking, greyish-black landscape of huge craters. As we fortunately found out afterwards, my battalion as well as our regiment's 1st Battalion, defending the outer perimeter of the town, did not suffer substantial losses. But my 6th Company, deployed outside the town, was totally overrun. According to statements from the few infantrymen who escaped, the young company commander and his messengers were taken prisoner. These surviving *Landsers* of 6th Company also reported that the Russian infantry and tanks broke through in great numbers between Votylevka and 34th Infantry Division to the southeast.[24]

The Soviet infantry was rapidly driven to ground by German machine-gun and artillery fire. When Kravchenko's tanks were ordered to advance and attempted to break through the German lines, they too were brought to a halt, in some cases by the artillery of the infantry divisions engaging them with direct fire. The only partial success in this sector came on the boundary between the two divisions, where Soviet troops succeeded in capturing the small town of Pavlovka after bitter fighting. As the short day drew to a close, the average advance was less than two miles; around Pavlovka, the attackers had penetrated a little over four miles (7km) but were now confronted by the second line of German defences.[25] Slightly further to the northeast, Lieutenant General Filipp Feodosevich Zhmachenko's Fortieth Army advanced against the German 88th Infantry Division. The defences here were not as robust or as densely manned and the attackers rapidly created a gap between this German unit and its neighbour to the southwest, 198th Infantry Division. The limited reserves of 88th Infantry Division, reinforced by an assault gun battalion, were thrown into a counterattack and briefly stopped the Soviet advance, but 198th Infantry Division was forced to extend its right flank in an attempt to fill the gap, leaving its previous sector dangerously weakened. This was a risk that was clearly recognised at higher levels, as Generalmajor Walter Wenck, chief of staff at First Panzer Army headquarters, recorded in the army diary that evening:

> The continuation of the enemy attack is anticipated with concern … Despite ruthless stripping of other sectors, the danger that [VII and LXII] corps will come under heavy pressure on their inner flanks … and the fact that they cannot resist for long is clearly acknowledged by [First Panzer] Army.[26]

After interrogating prisoners and examining the documents of dead soldiers, the Germans had belatedly identified the presence of Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army. This was ominous news: if the Red Army had deployed this formation in the sector, it suggested that Vatutin was planning more than simply a local attack to reach the isolated pocket of troops between Vinograd and Zvenigorodka. Aware that time was not on the side of the Germans, Wenck issued orders for the units still involved in *Watutin* to complete their operations as fast as possible so that they would be available to intervene.

On the Soviet side, Vatutin was as frustrated as Konev had been the previous evening, but at least one of his main thrusts had made good progress. Importantly, the attack by his eastern flank on the German 88th Infantry Division had reached a road that ran south to Zvenigorodka, the town designated as the meeting point for the two Soviet Fronts, and Vatutin decided to divert forces to make the most of the success. Kravchenko had held back most of V Guards Tank Corps – a tank brigade and a regiment of assault guns – as a reserve force and now created a new group around these units, adding a motorised rifle battalion.[27] This group, with its 55 tanks and assault guns, was ordered to accelerate the advance along the road to Zvenigorodka, but before it could begin its advance it had to struggle forward over broken ground and through the tangle of casualties, supply columns, and other reinforcements. It would be unable to exert any pressure before 27 January at the earliest.

After sufficient elements of 11th Panzer Division had arrived on 26 January, the division had commenced an attack towards Kapitanovka in the late afternoon. Despite Konev's intentions and expectations, the Germans encountered little organised resistance and entered Pissarevka before nightfall, surprising and routing a column of Soviet trucks and tanks. Wöhler ordered Generalleutnant Wend von Wietersheim, the division commander, to continue his advance; he would be reinforced by a battalion of assault guns. Further to the north, Soviet troops attempted to widen their penetration between the remnants of 389th Infantry Division and 72nd Infantry Division and a massed wave of soldiers surged forward into a devastating hail of machine-gun fire. The remaining artillery of 389th Infantry Division added its firepower to the carnage and, in the words of one of the German artillery observers, 'the Russians fell in heaps'.[28] As he looked back over the day, Stemmermann was both surprised and proud that his corps was still intact. His units – in particular, 389th Infantry Division – had suffered further heavy losses, but the Soviet units too had been badly hit. The various German units involved in the fighting claimed to have destroyed at least 90 Soviet tanks in the two days of fighting, though a group of perhaps 30 tanks had apparently succeeded in slipping through the German lines and had disappeared towards the west. Eighth Army headquarters informed Stemmermann that this group had reached the town of Lebedin, about seven miles (12km) to the west of Kapitanovka, where an improvised battlegroup formed from rear area units had intercepted it and brought it to a halt for the moment. Nevertheless, the great salient stretching towards the Dnepr was now badly endangered and both First Panzer Army and Eighth Army ordered their units to begin a quiet withdrawal towards the southwest – the front-line units were to leave a thin line of troops in the current front line to maintain the fiction that there had been no withdrawal without orders. However, when Generalleutnant Hans Speidel, Wöhler's chief of staff, discussed this with General Theodor Busse, chief of staff at Army Group South, the latter replied that the Führer had issued categoric orders: all units were to hold their current positions. The 'withdrawal by stealth' had to be reversed. Speidel pointed out that the situation was fast becoming untenable; Busse agreed with him, but added that Hitler's specific order had to be obeyed.

In his memoirs, Manstein wrote warmly about Busse, and the two men had worked harmoniously with each other earlier in the war. However, throughout the fighting of early 1944, Busse proved to be a stickler for following Hitler's instructions to the letter. Writing after the war, the former SS Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser acknowledged the importance of following orders, but stressed that commanders had responsibility for their subordinate troops, and that whilst a decision to disobey an order could never be taken lightly, he concluded that superiors might not be in a position to make the most informed decision, and 'only the immediate commander, who experienced the combat of the troops every day and also heard from them, was in that situation'.[29] Hausser – who had ordered the abandonment of Kharkov in direct contravention to Hitler's orders in February 1943 – added that a degree of courage was needed to disregard orders; clearly, Busse lacked the courage for such a step. Nor was he close enough to the fighting to be able to make a personal judgement.

Both sides were expecting a great deal from 27 January. The Red Army was anxious to see both Fronts achieve a decisive breakthrough, and the Germans hoped that the counterattack by 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions would see off the threat from 2nd Ukrainian Front before turning to deal with the danger from Vatutin's forces. It was the Red Army that struck first. The two brigades of XX Tank Corps, part of Fifth Guards Tank Army, continued to push westward and captured Shpola in mid-morning in the face of minimal opposition. To some extent, this probably came as no surprise to either side – the Germans lacked the resources to put anything more than ad hoc blocking units in the path of the Soviet attack and the roads were deteriorating as temperatures rose slightly, making a mass redeployment of armoured forces further west almost impossible. In any event, Konev and his subordinates knew that the usual way for the Wehrmacht to counter such penetrations was by attacking their flanks rather than confronting them. This flank attack commenced before dawn when 11th Panzer Division renewed its advance, probing forward through thick fog. At first, Wietersheim was able to report good progress, with his leading elements reaching an area to the east of Kapitanovka shortly after dawn; here they linked up with *Kampfgruppe von*

Brese, which had been isolated for over a day and had taken up defensive positions in a small area of woodland.[30]

Had 11th Panzer Division been remotely near its establishment strength, this advance would have had serious consequences for Rotmistrov's tank army, as the Germans were technically sitting on the supply lines for the Soviet armoured units. Despite having been reinforced by at least some parts of three separate assault gun battalions, the division had only 12 Panther tanks, three Pz.IVs, and 15 assault guns immediately available – far less than the establishment strength of a single panzer battalion, let alone a reinforced panzer division. The disparate elements of 14th Panzer Division were in even worse shape, with only three Pz.IVs and two assault guns. Nevertheless, reinforcements had been dispatched to the area. A battalion of 26th Panzer Regiment, previously subordinated to *Grossdeutschland*, had been released to support the operation and was on its way. However, it was not immediately available and was not expected until the following day – for the moment, the two weak panzer divisions would have to oppose the Soviet forces with just 35 tanks and assault guns. The Germans managed to fight their way into the southern parts of Kapitanovka, but further west, neither 14th nor 3rd Panzer Divisions were able to contribute with advances of their own; 14th Panzer Division became drawn into a wearing battle for the ruins of Rossoshovatka and the positions of 3rd Panzer Division were under constant artillery fire.

Konev and Rotmistrov had expected a German counterattack against the base of their penetration, but Konev's intention to block it with anti-tank units had not succeeded entirely – it seems that there wasn't sufficient time for the gunners to be deployed in the path of 11th Panzer Division. Two of Rotmistrov's three tank corps were to the west of Kapitanovka, and rather than turn these back to deal with the German counterattack, Rotmistrov and Konev decided that they should press on to try to link up with Vatutin's forces. The rest of Fifth Guards Tank Army, and Konev's operational reserve of V Guards Cavalry Corps, would be more than adequate to restore the situation at Kapitanovka. In any event, the infantry battle slightly to the north was continuing to favour the Red Army, with 389th Infantry Division rapidly approaching the end of its strength. Although the Germans had managed to restore contact between what remained of this division and 72nd Infantry Division, the Soviet forces in the area were clearly far superior in strength. Nevertheless, despite the slow progress of Fourth Guards Army's troops north of Kapitanovka, Rotmistrov decided that he couldn't wait for the infantry to restore contact with his spearheads and threw both XVIII Tank Corps and

V Guards Cavalry Corps into the attack. At the same time, a small group of Soviet tanks from the two corps that had already broken through to the west turned back and, catching 11th Panzer Division by surprise, succeeded in re-establishing a narrow corridor.

Konev clearly had his eye on Rotmistrov, but he had nothing but praise for the manner in which his subordinate had driven his forces forward, as he later wrote:

> The fighting was fierce. Some settlements changed hands several times. In these conditions, the tankers showed astonishing stamina and composure, heroically repelling the enemy's aggressive attacks.
>
> … Rotmistrov showed great endurance and tactical maturity. When I arrived at his command post … I believed that the situation was worrying. An artillery cannonade boomed, machine-gun fire could be heard nearby, shells were exploding everywhere and bullets whistled past. In this alarming situation, he directed his subordinate formations clearly, soberly assessed everything and made intelligent decisions.[31]

Konev was far less impressed with Ryzhov, whose Fourth Guards Army had been intended to make the initial breakthrough. Lieutenant General Ilya Kornilovich Smirnov, who had previously served as Konev's second-in-command, was ordered to replace Ryzhov. Despite his failure to impress, Ryzhov was reassigned to take command of the Soviet Seventieth Army, though it is perhaps significant that this was only for two months. He ended the war as commander of a rifle corps.

Renewed Soviet attacks drove the Germans out of Kapitanovka again, and in an attempt to release armoured forces and restore their mobility, Wöhler ordered 320th Infantry Division to hand over its sector of the front line to the neighbouring 10th Panzergrenadier Division and move north – it was to take over 3rd Panzer Division's sector, but this move would inevitably take several days. Meanwhile, Rotmistrov's orders for the bulk of his units to press on towards the west began to bear fruit. The gunners of the three German panzer divisions south of Kapitanovka continued to report that they were taking a heavy toll on Soviet tank units, but that those tank units continued to pour through along the roads heading west. Vormann later wrote:

> With no regard for losses, the Red Army's hordes flooded west during the afternoon past the tanks of 3rd, 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions, who were firing

> with every barrel, as well as through our heavy artillery bombardment. It was an astonishing and devastatingly dramatic scene. No other comparison is appropriate: the dam was broken and a huge, endless flood poured over the flat terrain where our tanks, surrounded by the few remaining infantrymen, stood like rocks in a storm. To our increasing astonishment, dense cavalry formations galloped west through our blocking fire late in the afternoon.[32]

Throughout this period, Stemmermann and others had been pressing for XI Corps to withdraw to a previously reconnoitred defensive line some distance to the west, the so-called *Hamsterstellung* ('Hamster line'), but Busse continued to insist that Hitler's orders to hold current positions remained in force. Late on 27 January, permission was finally granted for 72nd Infantry Division to fall back to this line. Meanwhile, Vatutin's forces were also making headway. A tank brigade managed to break through to the encircled Soviet forces near Tishishokva, but the decisive advance came a little to the east, where the combined force created around Kravchenko's reserves made a difficult night march to break out through Lysyanka, rupturing the seam between the German VII and XLII Corps. The town was an important supply centre and when Soviet tanks appeared, attacking both from the north and the northwest, the few defenders were rapidly put to flight. Leaving a small force to hold the town, the Soviet armoured group motored on towards Zvenigorodka.

Costly fighting raged along the line in other sectors, greatly limiting the ability of the Germans to reorganise their defences. There could be no doubt by early afternoon that the only way to avoid the German salient from being cut off was to authorise a major withdrawal, but Hitler's orders to hold fast continued to inhibit any movement. The staff officers at First Panzer Army headquarters could sympathise with the men of the front-line units, but could only respond to all requests for withdrawal with the same message: the requests would be passed to Army Group South for a decision. With Manstein still away at the Führer's conference and Busse effectively in command of the army group, there was little prospect of such a decision appearing rapidly, and Lieb, acting commander of XLII Corps, decided to emulate Hausser and took matters into his own hands, telling his units to commence preparations for a withdrawal. In the meantime, the position in the front line continued to deteriorate. There was open space between the right flank of the German 198th Infantry Division and 88th Infantry Division with no forces available to close it. From the headquarters of First Panzer Army, Wenck instructed XLII Corps to extract troops from its front line in the tip of the salient and to use these further south, thus effectively confirming the movements that Lieb had already ordered, but these forces would not amount to anywhere near sufficient strength to repair the line. In order to try to retain some semblance of capability for operational manoeuvre, Wenck advised the commanders of III Panzer Corps and VII and XLII Corps that they would receive oral orders for redeployment in what appears to have been a deliberate attempt to prevent Busse from insisting on strict adherence to Hitler's instructions.

As his battered and depleted infantry divisions struggled with increasing desperation to hold their lines and threw their minimal reserves into counterattacks against the constant Soviet incursions into their lines, Stemmermann continued to request permission for a withdrawal to the *Hamsterstellung*. Speidel replied from Eighth Army headquarters that permission would have to be obtained from Army Group South, and that he had already made such a request. Showing a degree of rigidity and inflexibility that was more reminiscent of Hitler than Manstein, Busse rejected every such request, whether it came from Wenck at First Panzer Army or Speidel at Eighth Army. He told Speidel that the orders that Manstein had issued before he departed for East Prussia – which made no mention of any tactical withdrawal – would prevail. This was arguably a selective interpretation: whilst Manstein had not given orders for possible withdrawals, nor had he issued instructions forbidding such moves. Busse then added that the estimates of Soviet troops assailing the German lines were, in the opinion both of Army Group South and *OKH*, exaggerated. Given the losses inflicted upon Soviet units in recent weeks, it was highly improbable that the Red Army could have concentrated such resources so quickly, or would be able to maintain this tempo of operations for long. What was required, he concluded, was for the German troops to hold fast for the moment. Troops would arrive from elsewhere to deal with the enemy units that had penetrated to the rear.

This was far more than reluctantly accepting that Hitler's instructions had to be followed. From intelligence reports that reached Army Group South, Busse must have known that a huge crisis was developing, and having been Manstein's chief of staff in the army group (or its predecessor, Army Group Don) since the Stalingrad crisis developed in late 1942, he would have experienced on several occasions the ability of the Red Army to refill its ranks far faster than the Wehrmacht could. Fortunately for the hard-pressed German troops in the front line, Busse decided – perhaps belatedly – to check with Manstein. After a brief discussion with Hitler, Manstein replied that an immediate withdrawal to the

Hamsterstellung was authorised, and this was rapidly passed to the front-line units. As 27 January drew to a close, exhausted German soldiers attempted to disengage from their opponents while at the same time seeking to seal off the constant penetrations in their front line.

Meanwhile, the forces intended to renew the attacks against the southern side of Konev's penetration were gathering. The battalion of Panther tanks from 26th Panzer Regiment designated as reinforcements for 11th Panzer Division had been formed the previous year, though it was not until the end of 1943 that it finally received the last of its 76 tanks. It was then transferred to Ukraine, and saw little or no action while subordinated to *Grossdeutschland*. Its vehicles were then ordered to drive about 45 miles (75km) to join 11th Panzer Division. At the outset of the redeployment it had 63 tanks operational with several more in its workshops; one tank was lost en route when it spontaneously burst into flames, and one of the battalion's two recovery vehicles was also badly damaged. Other tanks suffered mechanical breakdowns – a common problem with the Panther tank – but the battalion still comfortably more than doubled the German tank strength south of Kapitanovka. In particular, the powerful Panthers with their accurate long-range guns could arguably tip the balance in favour of the Germans.

The manner in which the German armoured forces had been fed into the battle was now a cause of confusion and difficulty. Until late on 27 January, Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps had control of 3rd Panzer Division; 14th Panzer Division had been subordinated to Stemmermann's XI Corps; and 11th Panzer Division was under the direct control of Eighth Army. Just as the Panther tank battalion was arriving, all the panzer divisions were belatedly reassigned to Vormann's corps, and Vormann was given overall command of the planned operation for 28 January to drive north into the base of the Soviet penetration. Whilst Vormann welcomed the coordination that he was now able to impose on the forces involved, there was little time to make any adjustments to existing deployments, and in addition to overseeing the armoured strike force, Vormann remained responsible for an extended sector of the front line running east. Major Heinz Glässgen, the commander of 26th Panzer Regiment's Panther battalion, was ordered to attack north in order to bypass the eastern edge of Kapitanovka and to link up with *Kampfgruppe von Brese*, once more isolated northeast of the town. Oberst Otto Büsing, the commander of the panzer regiment of *Grossdeutschland*, had accompanied the battalion and was in overall command of the attack, and began to probe north late on 27 January. After a brief pause during the night – most of which was spent in tiring maintenance work on the tanks – the formation moved north at first light the following morning.

Almost immediately, the Panthers came under Soviet artillery fire. Nevertheless, they pressed on towards Tishishokva but as they passed the eastern edge of the village they were engaged by Soviet anti-tank guns deployed amongst the buildings. Leaving one platoon facing the village – eventually, it was able to subdue all of the Soviet guns – the main force pushed on, unaware that the Soviet XVIII Tank Corps, commanded by Major General Vasily Iudovich Polozkov, was lying directly in its path. There were several confused clashes with Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns and the German advance rapidly degenerated into chaos. Glässgen and two of his four company commanders were killed or wounded in the fighting, and ten Panthers were lost and another 18 damaged by Soviet fire. A further 16 suffered mechanical breakdowns; by the end of the day, the battalion had just 17 tanks operational.[33] Control of the battalion broke down, with the remaining officers of the battalion repeatedly criticised by Büsing; but the *Grossdeutschland* officer badly mishandled artillery and air support of the operation, and his threats to court-martial the company and platoon commanders were perhaps an attempt to divert attention from himself. It is worth noting that he attempted to run the operation from some distance to the rear, completely contrary to standard practice in the Wehrmacht.[34] There was little attempt at proper reconnaissance, and the German tanks pressed forward without adequate infantry support; what assistance was available from artillery and aircraft was not used well. Admittedly, the Panthers arrived without any attached infantry, but their arrival had been expected for at least a day and no orders had been issued to any of the other units in the area to prepare even a single battalion of panzergrenadiers to support them, though the lateness of the orders assigning all of the panzer divisions to XLVII Panzer Corps contributed considerably to this. The personnel of the Panther battalion might have been relatively inexperienced, but Büsing was a veteran tank commander and should have known better – perhaps the reason why he heaped so much blame on his subordinates. After a discussion with Wietersheim that evening, Büsing dismissed one of the remaining company commanders. Polozkov's corps lost about 30 tanks in the fighting, but most importantly, the German attempt to eliminate the Soviet penetration at its base was effectively at an end. By the high standards of the Wehrmacht's panzer arm, the attack by the Panther battalion was clumsy and poorly handled and this battle represented a serious failure to use a powerful asset effectively.

Otroschenkov's tank was part of XVIII Tank Corps, and was heavily involved in the fighting:

> Our 170th Brigade was in the second echelon and entered the breakthrough at Ossitnyashka, defending the left flank of Fifth [Guards Tank] Army and the infantry units advancing towards Shpola. Our tank battalion and an anti-tank artillery battery were in the village of Rossoshovatka. A second battalion was in Petrovka. The Germans attacked from the southwest with substantial forces, trying to cut the lines of communication of the leading units of Fifth [Guards Tank] Army. Taking cover behind buildings, we beat off daily infantry and tank attacks for several days. There were a dozen tanks left in each battalion but we were ordered to attack, to make the enemy think that larger forces were stationed here. A stream flowed behind us and our village was in low land, with the Germans behind the hills from where they made sorties. In the evening, on the eve of the attack, I climbed up the hill with the scouts to have a look at Fritz. It was clear that they still had lots of tanks. At night, two companies of T-34s came up and deployed in nearby woodland. They joined the attack the next day – in the morning, we moved forward, firing a lot to simulate a major attack. Either because of this demonstration or due to exhaustion, the Germans made no further attacks towards us. Meanwhile our troops continued to move up, both infantry and artillery. The Germans held their ground for a couple of days and then retreated.[35]

On the same day that the German armoured attack foundered near Kapitanovka, the leading elements of the Soviet XX Tank Corps, the spearhead of Rotmistrov's army, reached the outskirts of Zvenigorodka. Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Ivanovich Proshin was leading the way with his 155th Tank Brigade. He was aware that there was still heavy fighting to his rear and that his lines of communication were fragile, to say the least, but he had orders to press on while fuel and ammunition supplies lasted. Close behind him was another tank brigade and Proshin barely paused before pushing into Zvenigorodka. The only German defenders were hastily organised platoons of rear area troops and they were rapidly put to flight, and by dusk the town was in Soviet hands. Meanwhile, 233rd Tank Brigade, the leading unit of Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army, was approaching the town from the north. Dmitri Fedorovich Loza was a tank crewman in Sixth Tank Army, in a unit that was equipped with American-built Sherman tanks:

> As tanks from Fifth [Guards Tank] Army approached from the south, our Shermans drove down from the north. Our men in the T-34s [from Proshin's

> tank brigade] weren't warned that our Shermans were here and they set the tank of the battalion commander, Nikolai Nikolaevich Maslukov, ablaze, and killed him.[36]

Proshin's men rapidly realised their mistake and ceased firing. The encirclement of the German troops in the salient stretching northeast to the Dnepr – four infantry divisions, *SS-Wiking*, and two assault gun battalions – had been completed by 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts. Nearly 60,000 German soldiers were trapped in the pocket that had been created.

CHAPTER 4

ANOTHER STALINGRAD

Ever since the heady triumph of Operation *Uranus* – the Red Army's strike against the German line that led to the encirclement of Stalingrad in November 1941 – senior Soviet officers had striven to repeat their success. On several occasions they appeared to have such a triumph in their grasp – several elements of the German Second Army, for example, were briefly encircled in the weeks that followed the Stalingrad encirclement, and there were repeated moments when the German forces in the Caucasus seemed to be in imminent danger of being cut off by a Soviet advance to the shores of the Sea of Azov – but success on anything remotely approaching the scale of Stalingrad repeatedly eluded them. During the second half of 1943, Manstein managed to pull back his armies to and across the Dnepr, once more denying the Red Army an encirclement. Briefly, German forces had been encircled north of Kirovograd, but as has already been described, they were able to extricate themselves quickly. Now, a new large encirclement had been created, and Zhukov and other senior commanders were determined that the Germans would not escape.

In earlier operations, including the encirclement of Stalingrad, Soviet planners had expected that after achieving the encirclement, their armoured units would turn inwards to compress the enemy forces and ideally break up the encirclement so that it would be unable to organise a coherent all-round defence. The outward-facing side of the encirclement would be secured by cavalry units, often with supporting tank formations. This proved to be unsatisfactory, particularly on the outward-facing side; the cavalry forces committed in this manner might be able to exploit the breach that was created in German lines by the encirclement, but were too weak to fight a sustained battle against any German attempt to rescue the encircled troops. When they planned the Korsun encirclement, Zhukov, Konev and Vatutin agreed to reverse this arrangement. Once the pincers met at Zvenigorodka, Kravchenko's and Rotmistrov's tanks would turn outwards to ward off German counterattacks and to exploit the holes in the enemy's lines, while cavalry and infantry secured the pocket and reduced it. But even as 155th and 233rd Tank Brigades met in Zvenigorodka, this plan was already looking unworkable, largely due to the stubborn resistance against both Ukrainian Fronts, particularly in the east. As a consequence of this, Konev's infantry units were still some distance from Zvenigorodka, and although Rotmistrov took great delight in reporting to Konev that the encirclement had been completed, he added that it was porous at best.

In his memoirs, Konev described how he fed reserves into the line in order to complete the operation:

> The situation in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation changed dramatically, and consequently it was necessary to identify quickly the most important issues and make decisions immediately. There were many surprises and risks. It was vital to reinforce the troops that had achieved the breakthrough and had cut the enemy's front quickly, take steps to repel attacks against the flank at the base of the breakthrough, and organise the deployment of troops to create outer and inner rings of encirclement … For this, second echelons and reserves were prepared.[1]

This gives an impression of careful anticipation and the preparation of appropriate reserves, but the reality was far more one of improvisation. When they met in Zvenigorodka, the Soviet tank units in the region were operating in open space, and had they – and more importantly the units following close behind – immediately turned into the pocket, it is likely that they would have been able to break it up before it could organise its defences. However, the original Soviet plans called for most of these tanks to face outwards and to push further in order to make the task of any German relief effort far harder, and officers at all levels laboured hard to catch up with events and to decide how to modify plans. In some respects, the success of the encirclement produced opportunities that were out of proportion to the forces available to exploit them. A powerful thrust into the pocket might overwhelm it before it could form properly; a drive further west and southwest through the open space in the German lines might conceivably destabilise the entire defensive line of Army Group South. In particular, the city of Uman, a vital railway and road junction with an airfield from which supplies would be flown into the encirclement over the next few days, was barely 33 miles

(55km) away, with almost no German units in the path of a possible Soviet advance. For the moment, Konev and Vatutin concentrated on securing the pocket, believing that they had encircled about 100,000 Germans. Rotmistrov already had his hands full defending the long corridor from Zvenigorodka to the rest of 2nd Ukrainian Front, particularly as 11th Panzer Division was still effectively blocking his supply lines. Additionally, Kravchenko was forced to release a mechanised corps in order to shore up the Red Army's positions further west, where the German Operation *Watutin* had created significant weaknesses, though he was given an additional rifle corps as a replacement – the infantry of this corps would, in any event, be of greater value in securing defensive positions.

The deliberately limited ambitions of *Stavka* during this operation contrast strikingly with the enthusiasm following the Stalingrad encirclement. To an extent, this reflected the lessons learned from that previous campaign, when Soviet over-ambition ultimately gave Manstein an opportunity to launch a devastating counteroffensive. Zhukov and his subordinates were fully aware that the Germans were almost certain to make an attempt to rescue the soldiers trapped in the pocket, and there were still substantial doubts about the tactical ability of Soviet units to engage with their German opponents in what could become a confused series of encounter battles. It was with undisguised relief that Manstein and his staff received news that far from exploiting their gains and advancing towards Uman, the Soviet armoured groups were content to hold their positions, particularly as there was a yawning gap in the German front line between Vormann's units to the east and the exposed flank of First Panzer Army in the west.

Konev later wrote that whilst the Red Army outnumbered the Germans, the Wehrmacht had an advantage in numbers of tanks.[2] This is surely incorrect, and would only have been possible if the German units that Manstein was marshalling were at anything approaching full strength. Although the two tank armies had suffered losses – Rotmistrov's army had been particularly badly hit as it had encountered several panzer divisions, and reported losing 205 tanks and assault guns by the end of 29 January – the advantage in armoured vehicles almost certainly still lay with the Red Army.[3] An attempt to advance towards Uman, or an immediate attack into the encirclement from the southwest, would have spelled disaster for the Wehrmacht; by doing neither, the Red Army arguably missed a golden opportunity. To help it hold its positions, Rotmistrov's army was now reinforced with a rifle corps, an anti-tank brigade, and a brigade of combat engineers.

The task for the German senior commanders was far harder than that faced by Konev and Vatutin. Outside the encirclement, there was open space between the forces of Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps in the east and VII Corps to the west. Rear area units were hastily organised into battlegroups and thrust into line, but if the Red Army attacked in strength, there was little realistic chance of them being able to hold their positions for long. Inside the pocket, there was similarly a large area with very little protection towards the southwest. Troops would have to be pulled out of line elsewhere in the encirclement and deployed in this sector, and given that Stemmermann had been reporting for several days that he lacked the strength to hold his existing front line, this would only be possible if he was permitted to make substantial withdrawals.

There were other factors that exacerbated the problems of the encircled troops. The rear area elements of 389th Infantry Division had been ordered to move to safety before Rotmistrov's tanks pushed forward to Zvenigorodka and were now outside the pocket, and just as had been the case in the encirclement near Kirovograd, this was a mixed blessing. Whilst the move reduced the number of men encircled, it deprived the division of support services of all kinds – medical, logistic and transport. At least two other divisions in the pocket had also been cut off from some of their rear area units. Most of the encircled units were under the command of Stemmermann's XI Corps, part of Eighth Army, but in the northwest part of the encirclement there were parts of Lieb's XLII Corps, which was under the command of First Panzer Army. In order to streamline command decisions, it was important to recognise this problem and place both corps under a single army command. Logically, XLII Corps should be transferred to Eighth Army, but Busse advised Speidel that he would have to seek Manstein's approval for this transfer.

Fortunately, Manstein returned to his headquarters on 28 January. If he was unhappy with the manner in which his staff – particularly Busse – had handled matters in his absence, he makes no mention of it in his memoirs. Nevertheless, the creation of a new Stalingrad was something that he had feared for over a year, and he rapidly issued a series of orders. Most of these related to matters that Busse, Wenck and Speidel had already addressed, such as the reassignment of XLII Corps to Eighth Army. In addition, as the senior officer in the encirclement, Stemmermann was ultimately given overall command of all the trapped troops. First Panzer Army's III Panzer Corps was ordered – as Wenck had already instructed – to bring *Watutin* to an end as quickly as possible; Breith was then to move his divisions to a start-line west of the encirclement and mount a relief operation. At the same time, Vormann was to concentrate the strength of his panzer divisions; in addition, he would receive the relatively fresh 24th Panzer Division, currently held behind the increasingly pointless and endangered bridgehead at Nikopol, and his XLVII Panzer Corps was to attack towards the pocket from the south. Within the pocket, Manstein authorised a withdrawal from the northern extremity to a more easily defended – and, importantly, shorter – line. With his lines dangerously overextended – three understrength battalions of *Korps Abteilung B* on the northern flank of XLII Corps were holding a front of almost 45 miles (75km) – Lieb had already issued orders for such a withdrawal.

Inevitably, these instructions required approval from *OKH* and therefore Hitler. The response from the Führer further highlighted the gap between Hitler and his personal entourage on the one hand and the realities of the front line on the other. A counterattack to reach the pocket was approved, but the intention of this was to achieve an encirclement of the Soviet armour that had reached Zvenigorodka. Once this had been done, the panzer divisions were to push on, using the former salient to strike northwest along the west bank of the Dnepr to reach and recapture Kiev. In light of this, permission for withdrawals within the pocket was refused as this would entail abandoning ground that could be used as the starting point of an attack towards Kiev. With communication delays between *OKH* and Army Group South, between Manstein and the armies under his command, and between those armies and the troops in the pocket, Lieb's withdrawal continued without any direct authorisation. It is difficult to know whether Manstein ever seriously intended to implement Hitler's instructions, or whether he simply regarded them as unachievable fantasies; all of the plans that he made suggest the latter, and throughout the days that followed he and his staff behaved as if restoring contact with the two isolated corps and subsequently pulling back to a shorter defensive line was the purpose of the planned operation. Like many officers and men who had fought against the Red Army as part of Army Group Don the previous winter, Manstein was badly scarred by the disaster at Stalingrad. Even though responsibility for the encirclement of Paulus' Sixth Army in the city was primarily due to Hitler's mistakes, and despite the remarkable recovery along the Donets in March 1943, there is little doubt from Manstein's memoirs that he carried a sense of guilt for having failed to rescue the German troops encircled on the shores of the Volga, regardless of where blame ultimately lay. Rescuing *Gruppe Stemmermann* was therefore an absolute priority, though Manstein also hoped that the relief attempt would also inflict sufficient damage upon Fifth Guards Tank Army and Sixth Army to prevent them from making further attacks on his battered armies. This, surely, was as much as could reasonably be expected. A thrust along the west bank of the Dnepr to recapture Kiev was pure fantasy.

During 29 and 30 January, Konev's infantry laboured forward to secure the corridor created by the advance of Fifth Guards Tank Army. Fourth Guards and Fifty-Third Army eventually drove off 11th Panzer Division and other German armoured units from Vormann's corps and strengthened the line facing south and southwest, while Fifty-Second Army deployed to face into the pocket. On 29 January, much of the Soviet V Guards Cavalry Corps burst through the German lines to the north of Kapitanovka, and the village of Tashlyk was the scene of repeated attacks and counterattacks; even in the absence of an attack against the encirclement by Fifth Guards Tank Army, a crisis rapidly developed as the cavalry corps threatened to break into the pocket from the southwest, but a depleted regiment of German infantry managed to cling on for long enough to prevent this corner of the pocket from collapsing entirely. A battlegroup from *SS-Wiking* was able to intercept and destroy at least some of the Soviet tanks from V Guards Cavalry Corps that had broken into the rear area, and the line held. Zhukov and his subordinates were both surprised and disappointed by the determination of German resistance, but the failure of the attempt by V Guards Cavalry Corps to break into the pocket and disorganise it was at least partly due to problems on the Soviet side as well as the strength of the German troops, as Zhukov later wrote:

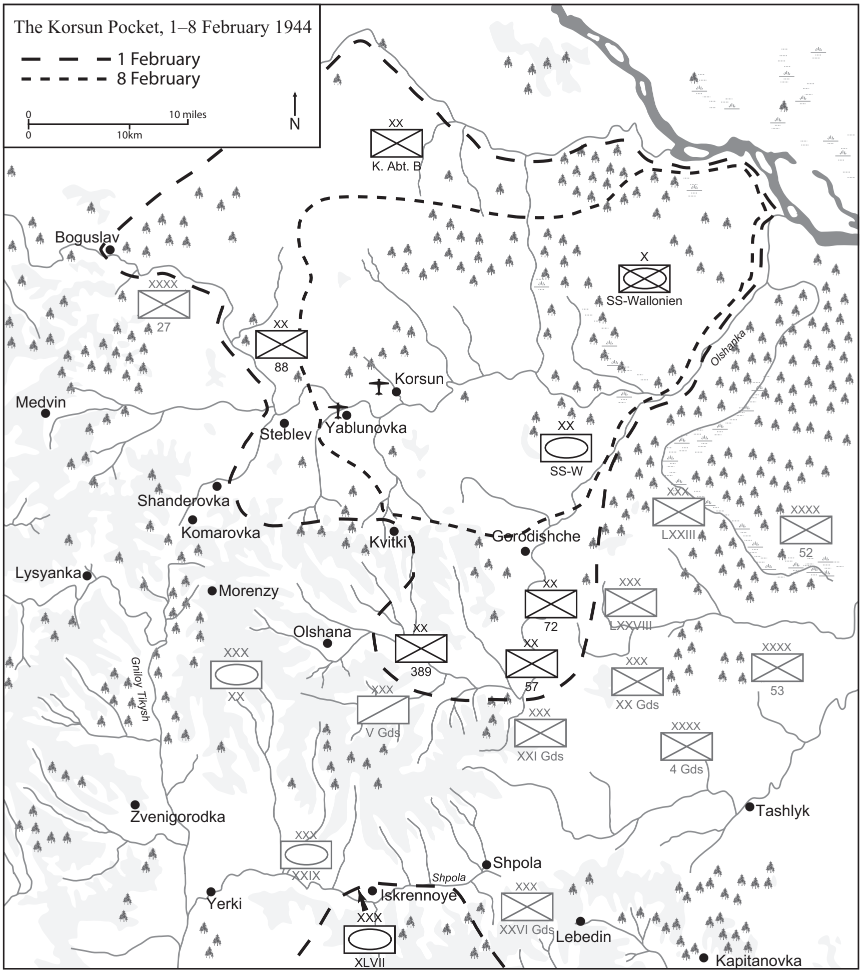
> The encircled German troops put up stubborn resistance, clinging to each line and settlement, hiding in woodland. We needed to drive the enemy from his positions with powerful artillery fire, but we were unable to organise this because of a complete lack of roads. To stockpile the minimum necessary supplies of shells, mines, and tank fuel, we had to organise delivery by oxen, stretchers, or sacks – in short, however we could. On this occasion, the residents of the Ukrainian villages provided great assistance.[4]

Whether the local Ukrainians provided assistance willingly or not is unknown.

By contrast to the Soviet forces who struggled with ever-lengthening supply lines, the Germans were slowly withdrawing towards their supply bases and were able to use their artillery effectively to break up Soviet attacks, though even by 30 January some units were reporting shortages of ammunition. Partly in reaction to the manner in which Soviet forces had disrupted German supply lines when the Don front collapsed in late 1942, Hitler had ordered substantial stocks of food and ammunition to be held further forward, and on this occasion at least these stocks proved to be essential.

The attempts by the Red Army to penetrate into the almost defenceless southern side of the pocket, and the redeployment of troops by Stemmermann and Lieb to prevent this, have sometimes been described as a race.[5] In many respects, this race was more of a laborious struggle along poor roads and tracks, sometimes frozen and on other occasions reduced to a muddy morass. Stemmermann pulled back the southern flank of his XI Corps, with the remaining men of 57th and 389th Infantry Divisions in almost continuous contact with the Red Army, while Lieb tried to withdraw 88th Infantry Division. An improvised detachment of three battalions from *Korps Abteilung B* was dispatched to the southern flank of Lieb's line where it almost immediately encountered Soviet troops cautiously probing forwards. Other improvised groups rushed to defend the approaches to Korsun – if this town were to be captured by the Red Army, the loss of the supplies held there, and the nearby airfield, would be catastrophic for the Wehrmacht. The first supply flights had already landed here and this airfield would prove vital for the men in the encirclement. There was a series of desperate battles for villages like Steblev, Olshana and Kvitki, but the German line began to stabilise. It was a decidedly uneven series of actions, with Soviet forces greatly outnumbering the German defenders, but Soviet attacks were poorly coordinated; elements of XX Guards Tank Corps, for example, were beaten off when they tried to penetrate into Olshana without adequate infantry support; the mounted troops of Major General Aleksei Gordeevich Selivanov's V Guards Cavalry Corps were unable to achieve success without armour and artillery; and it would be several days before Selivanov's artillery assets were able to reach the front line. The northern and northeast perimeter of the pocket was held by Hauptsturmührer Leon Degrelle's *SS-Wallonien* brigade, a unit recruited from French-speaking Belgians and led by the former leader of the Belgian Rexist political party, which was broadly supportive of Nazi policies. Some of his men were holding a bridge over the Olshanka River, which was regarded as pointless by Degrelle and his men – the bridge was in the front line and the tiny bridgehead beyond it was of no tactical use. Degrelle requested permission to destroy the bridge, but this was turned down. After a brief discussion with the German liaison officer in his brigade, Degrelle ordered the bridge demolished late on 29 January. He and the German liaison officer reported that the bridge had taken a direct hit from Soviet artillery.[6]

Despite having substantial stockpiles of food and ammunition, *Gruppe Stemmermann* would not be able to survive for long without additional supplies. The Luftwaffe made its first flights into the pocket, landing at the airfields at Korsun and Yablonovka, on 29 January. At first, these flights were at low altitude, with the result that they were vulnerable to ground fire, but when a group of aircraft returning to Uman from the pocket, laden with wounded men, attempted


The Korsun Pocket, 1–8 February 1944
1 February
8 February
0
10 miles
0
10km
N
XX
K. Abt. B
X
SS-Wallonien
XXXX
27
XX
88
Boguslav
Korsun
Medvin
Steblev
Yablunovka
Olshanka
XX
SS-W
Shanderovka
Komarovka
Kvitki
Gorodishche
XXX
LXXIII
XXXX
52
Lysyanka
Morenzy
XX
72
XXX
LXXVIII
Olshana
XX
389
XX
57
XXX
XX Gds
XXXX
53
XXX
XX
Gniloy Tikysh
XXX
V Gds
XXX
XXI Gds
XXXX
4 Gds
Tashlyk
Zvenigorodka
XXX
XXIX
Shpola
Shpola
Yerki
Iskrennoye
XXX
XLVII
XXX
XXVI Gds
Lebedin
Kapitanovka

to evade Soviet anti-aircraft guns by flying higher, it was ambushed by Soviet fighter planes. Many of the transports were shot down and others badly damaged and German fighter planes were belatedly ordered to the area. Thereafter, all flights were at an altitude sufficiently high to avoid anti-aircraft fire, and the handful of German fighters present was usually enough to prevent Soviet interception. Throughout the life of the pocket, this fragile air bridge continued to provide essential supplies of ammunition, fuel and medicines – there was sufficient food in the stockpiles for the moment – and delivered an estimated 2,000 tons to *Gruppe Stemmermann*. The returning planes brought over 4,100 wounded men to safety, at a price of about 50 aircraft shot down or lost due to accidents; a total of a little over 1,500 flights were made, giving a loss rate of about 3 per cent.[7] Given the losses suffered by the Luftwaffe in the past, particularly during the disastrous attempts to run airlifts to Stalingrad and Tunisia in 1942 and 1943, this operation was a singular success. Nevertheless, the air bridge was constantly criticised by the men within the encirclement. The airfield at Korsun lay within the area controlled by XLII Corps and Oberst Richard Gädke, Stemmermann's chief of staff at the headquarters of XI Corps, complained that XLII Corps was unfairly taking advantage of this to seize more than its fair share of supplies. Wöhler ordered that the supplies were to be divided equally between the two corps in an attempt to settle the argument.

For several days, a gap at least five miles wide (8.5km) remained open on the southern front of the encirclement, with only the thinnest line of outposts defending the German units. Had Konev been aware of this, he would surely have ordered an armoured force to push forward and prevent the pocket from stabilising, but the poor weather made aerial reconnaissance difficult, and the gap in the German lines was dominated by two small valleys, both of which had been reduced to swampy mud by changes in the weather. This greatly limited the area where Soviet forces could attack. Repeated assaults along the front held by XI Corps hindered the redeployment of troops in order to close the gap; indeed, repelling these attacks was almost too much for the German defenders, particularly on 1 February, when Stemmermann reported to Wöhler that every man available was fighting in the front line, with no reserves available. Despite the efforts of the Luftwaffe, fuel and ammunition began to run short, and there were increasingly frequent reports of unauthorised withdrawals, exposing the flanks of neighbouring formations. As fighting continued over the next few days, Stemmermann repeatedly moved small units from one point to another to try to shore up his sagging defences, but the Red Army was also feeling the strain. Selivanov's V Guards Cavalry Corps planned a major attack into the soft underbelly of the pocket for 6 February, but just in time the Germans managed to close the gap between the southern flank of XI Corps and the defenders of Olshana. Exhausted by days of fighting and marching, the Soviet units struggled through the mud, but without artillery support they couldn't achieve a breakthrough. The German line was pushed back in places, but continued to hold.

Along the western side of the pocket, Vatutin repeatedly urged Lieutenant General Sergei Georgevich Trofimenko's Twenty-Seventh Army to make greater efforts to break into the German defences; Vatutin was aware that First Panzer

Army was reorganising its forces and he was anxious to overcome the Germans within the encirclement before he had to divert troops to the west. Bloody fighting around Kvitki and Steblev continued almost without a break, and Soviet commanders increasingly showed their frustration, as a radio message intercepted by *SS-Wiking* revealed:

> [Senior Soviet officer:] I have told you, Kvitki is ours for the taking, but there are still Germans in it.
>
> [Subordinate:] We have had heavy casualties, hardly any food, and then there's the mud … my men can't go any further!
>
> [Senior officer:] What? They can't do it? Then send a few to the happy hunting ground, so the others will know that we mean business![8]

It should be noted that the German formations, including some within the encirclement, were also forced to take extreme measures to maintain discipline. Many divisions and regiments reported that their officers had to issue repeated orders before the exhausted and demoralised soldiers would obey, and in some cases men were subjected to punishments for insubordination. Losing an average of 300 men a day, the surrounded Germans continued to resist, blocking every Soviet attempt to break up the pocket. The price they paid in casualties was high, and by the end of the first week of February the pocket had shrunk considerably, partly as Stemmermann and Lieb deliberately withdrew, partly in the face of constant Soviet pressure. Yet despite the best efforts of the Red Army, it remained intact.

Manstein's plans for a relief operation were steadily taking shape. Breith's III Panzer Corps was to concentrate 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions and Bäke's heavy tank regiment to the southwest of the pocket, from where they would attack towards the town of Medvin into the right flank of Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army. As a second wave, Manstein intended to assign 1st Panzer Division and *LSSAH* to III Panzer Corps as they became available with the cessation of *Watutin*. The initial advance would amount to only 18 miles (30km), and Breith was to turn to the southeast and crush the rest of Kravchenko's armour before proceeding against Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army. At the same time, he would restore contact with the pocket. At the beginning of the operation, the force could field over 140 tanks – surely enough to ensure success, even if the accompanying panzergrenadier regiments were barely at half their establishment strength. Meanwhile, Vormann had been trying to replenish 3rd, 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions after their recent fighting and was due to receive 13th Panzer Division as additional reinforcements. This group would attack towards the north through Shpola to reach *Gruppe Stemmermann* from the south, an advance that was similar to that expected of III Panzer Corps. Thereafter, Manstein hoped that they would be able to turn west and attack into the rear of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army. Whilst Generalmajor Hans Mikosch's 13th Panzer Division was in relatively good shape, the other three divisions had very few tanks remaining and their panzergrenadier regiments were also badly depleted. In an attempt to give XLVII Panzer Corps something approaching reasonable strike power, Manstein intended to reinforce it further with 24th Panzer Division. The original 24th Panzer Division was destroyed in Stalingrad; after being rebuilt around elements that were outside the encirclement, the division returned to the Eastern Front in the autumn of 1943 and took part in a successful counterattack against Soviet forces attempting to advance towards Krivoy Rog from the Dnepr. It was then dispatched to the Nikopol bridgehead, where it helped beat off several Soviet attempts to push the Germans back over the Dnepr, and was still in good shape. Without first securing Hitler's consent, Manstein ordered the division – currently part of Sixth Army – to be replaced by an infantry division and to drive by road to join XLVII Panzer Corps.

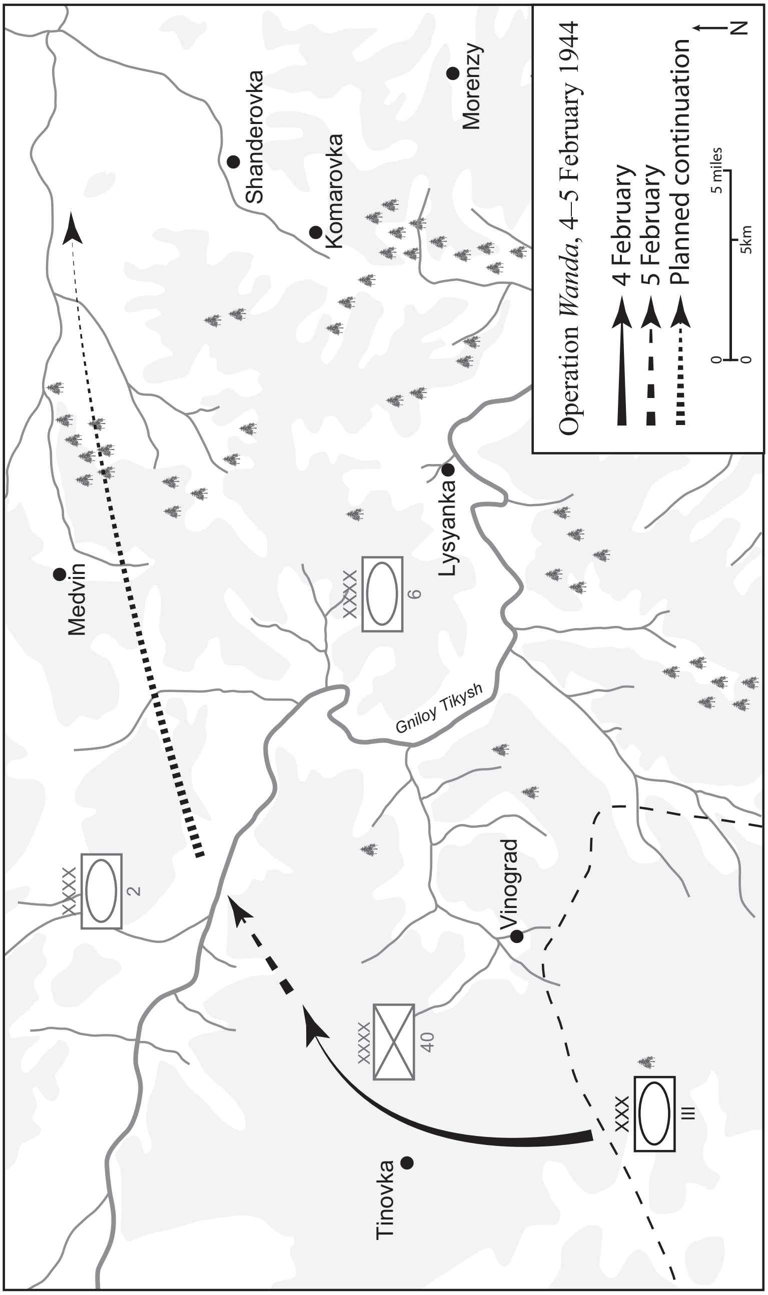
Inevitably, the movement of the divisions of III Panzer Corps was highly dependent upon road conditions. At first, the ground remained frozen, but during 29 January the temperature began to rise and the roads deteriorated rapidly. Some units were moving their heavy equipment by rail in order to save fuel and avoid excessive engine and track wear, but these movements too proved to be less than straightforward. When Bäke's tanks drove into the small town of Oratov in order to be loaded onto railway flatcars, the Germans were surprised to find a force of Soviet tanks was already in the town. There was a brief but decisive battle in which the German Panthers and Tigers demonstrated their superior firepower, claiming 46 Soviet tanks destroyed for no losses, and then proceeded to board the waiting railway cars.[9] Even as the combat units struggled to move to their planned positions, the staff at army and army group level wrestled with logistic issues, striving to assemble sufficient stocks of fuel and ammunition to support *Wanda*, the codename for First Panzer Army's contribution to the relief operation. To the relief of everyone, the roads still froze every night, allowing for redeployment to continue more or less as planned.

Whilst fighting between Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front and Hube's First Panzer Army had largely died down after the initial encirclement, battles continued to rage along the line held by Eighth Army south of Kapitanovka. Both sides struggled to improve their positions – Konev's infantry fought its way forward to protect the vital supply lines for the tank forces that had pushed on to the west, while Wöhler repeatedly urged Vormann to maintain pressure on the Soviet lines, in the hope that a breakthrough might be possible before the Red Army's defences hardened. Vormann would have preferred to pull his exhausted panzer divisions out of line in order to give them an opportunity for rest before the relief attempt, particularly if the divisions were to be directed to engage Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army. Additionally, he argued in vain, right to the last moment, that it would be better to wait until Breith's III Panzer Corps was ready to attack from the west. This would also give more time for other German units to arrive – 13th Panzer Division had so far been able to contribute a single battlegroup built around its few tanks, and most of the division's artillery and logistic formations were still struggling to reach the area along badly degraded roads. Vormann was also aware that III Panzer Corps was substantially stronger than his own forces, and feared that he would be able to achieve little on his own. Wöhler, though, was adamant, and insisted that pressure was exerted immediately. This would at least tie down Soviet forces and prevent them being moved into more favourable defensive positions.

On 1 February, XLVII Panzer Corps began its attack. Somewhat to Vormann's surprise, 11th Panzer Division – in reality, reduced to the strength of a relatively weak battlegroup – managed to push forward about 12 miles (20km) and reached the village of Iskrennoye, where it seized a bridge over the Shpola River. Immediately, Rotmistrov responded by ordering units from XVIII and XXIXI Tank Corps to counterattack. The first T-34s soon appeared and a tank duel began at medium range, with the Germans further hindered by a sudden change in the weather: the ice on the Shpola broke up as temperatures rose and several large floes struck the fragile bridge, destroying it after only four of the division's tanks had crossed. Three days of bitter fighting followed. Although they managed to hold their bridgehead, the Germans were unable to make any further progress and their numbers declined alarmingly. Reinforcements in the shape of 13th Panzer Division's armoured battlegroup remained stranded on the south bank, providing valuable fire support but unable to exploit the initial success of 11th Panzer Division. In other circumstances, bridging engineers would have moved forward to restore the crossing, but such units were stranded far to the rear in the mud and chaos.

Wöhler was repeatedly critical of Vormann's conduct of the battle and on several occasions sent instructions about matters that should properly have been left to the corps commander, such as where he should locate his headquarters. On some occasions, Vormann responded with a rebuttal of the criticism, but on others he opted for silence. Slightly belatedly, Wöhler flew to Vormann's headquarters on 2 February. Confronted by the reality of the front line, with depleted German infantry divisions attempting to hold unrealistic stretches of front line while equally depleted panzer divisions struggled forward in what was clearly a vain attempt to reach the Korsun pocket, Wöhler finally accepted that XLVII Panzer Corps was too weak to mount the operation demanded of it. Even reaching the encircled pocket was beyond its resources, and the planned destruction of Soviet armoured units was clearly an impossible task. The only consolation was that elements of the Soviet V Guards Cavalry Corps had been diverted south to block Vormann's attack, thus reducing slightly the pressure upon the defenders of the Korsun pocket.

Despite Wöhler's depressing assessment, Manstein remained determined to persevere with his original plan. There was a last-minute delay in the operation to allow for III Panzer Corps to complete assembling its forces, but like their opposite numbers in Eighth Army, Hube and Breith began to doubt the wisdom of the plan to try to destroy the Soviet armour that had achieved the encirclement. The news from within the pocket – of incessant Soviet attacks and diminishing defensive strength – suggested that the priority should be to break through to the encircled troops as fast as possible. If III Panzer Corps concentrated on reaching the pocket and Vormann was able to achieve a similar success from the southeast, the Soviet armour would be encircled in any case, but Manstein rejected these suggestions. Any such alteration would inevitably lead to further delays in starting the advance, and this appears to have dominated his thinking: time was of the essence if the encircled troops were to be saved. The plan to strike towards Medvin first, rather than taking the direct and shortest route to the encirclement via Morenzy, remained in force, not least because the road from Medvin to the encirclement was deemed to be superior to the road from Morenzy, and a good road would be essential for the heavy German tanks. When the plans for *Wanda* were first drawn up, the attack on Medvin was a logical way to proceed, and actually represented the shortest path to the surrounded troops. However, the withdrawal of the men in the pocket into a smaller perimeter meant that this was no longer the case. To an extent, First Panzer Army had incomplete information about this, as the encircled troops were now all under the command of Eighth Army, but the same is not true for Manstein. At the headquarters of Army Group South, he must have been aware of the movements within the pocket, in particular the abandonment of the town of Boguslav, which was the closest point to Medvin. This oversight by a man who was renowned for his clarity of thought, attention to detail and swift grasp of events is striking and may reflect the pressures under which he was working. Characteristically, his memoirs include no reference to this.


Operation *Wanda*, 4–5 February 1944
4 February
5 February
Planned continuation
0
5 miles
0
5km
N
Shanderovka
Komarovka
Morenzy
Medvin
Lysyanka
XXXX
6
Gniloy Tikysh
XXXX
2
Vinograd
XXXX
40
XXX
III
Tinovka

Before dawn on 4 February, the artillery of Breith's III Panzer Corps commenced its preparatory bombardment of Soviet positions, and the troops moved forward shortly after. The Red Army had known that an attack was coming for some considerable time but the concentration of German forces was substantial and, supported by dive-bombers, the German forces moved forward rapidly, bearing in mind the difficult conditions. By the end of the day, they had covered about 12 miles (20km). It was an encouraging start, but the need to ensure a continuous defensive line within the pocket had required substantial withdrawals by the German XI and XLII Corps, and news of this only reached Breith after the operation began. Despite the successful beginning, there was still a long way to go.

Even as news began to reach the various German headquarters of the successes of the first day of the operation, the weather was turning against III Panzer Corps. To date, the ground had begun to thaw during the day but had generally frozen again during the night, but the temperature now rose above freezing and stayed there. To make matters worse, there were frequent showers of rain, and combined with the snow that now thawed rapidly, this turned the landscape into a sea of mud. The two panzer divisions designated as the second wave of *Wanda* – 1st Panzer Division and *LSSAH* – reported that despite having set off for Uman before Breith attacked, their wheeled elements were stranded and strung out over a considerable distance:

> On the same day [as 1st Panzer Division's armoured battlegroup, consisting of a tank battalion, a half-track panzergrenadier battalion, and a self-propelled artillery battalion set off for Uman by rail], the division's [wheeled] units set off south towards Uman, in sudden spring weather over difficult, extremely poor, sodden roads that were knee-deep in mud. The heavy Ukrainian soil and slush were soon mixed into a sticky porridge. Even tracked vehicles began to get bogged down. On 3, 4, and 5 February, despite almost always moving in several columns side by side, individual battalions managed to cover only a few kilometres.[10]

LSSAH set off with an operational tank strength of three Tigers, eight Panthers, and nine Pz.IVs; a further three Tigers, 11 Panthers, 13 Pz.IVs and 19 assault guns were some way to the rear and would take additional time to arrive. The division's diary recorded that the panzergrenadiers managed to move less than ten miles (16km) in 20 hours because of the mud:

> The division reported that the bulk of its forces were stuck in the mud on the road just west of Krivets. The mud was so deep that even the Panthers were mired

> down. It was impossible to avoid this piece of road. The bridges to the east were inadequate, and the forest and uneven terrain prevented passage to the west.[11]

The adjutant of 1st Panzer Division's combat engineer battalion wrote in his diary:

> We relocated to the Uman sector, which was the preparation area for an attack. It rained for hours. We rolled on – which actually meant we crawled forward through deep sludge; the entire landscape dissolved into mud. The radio half-track, which was to report when the column in front of us had moved on, became bogged down in front of the next village. The next half-track that we brought forward to pull the radio half-track free was left stranded when its axle broke. Then a third half-track tried to pull the second aside while a mortar half-track went to the aid of the radio vehicle.
>
> … Shortly before midnight on 4 February we arrived [in Voronitsi], the battalion having laboured for 12 hours along the 8km [five mile] stretch from Pikiv. It was a 'mud-march', of the sort that even old 'Russian hares' like us had never experienced. Reconnaissance reports around midday of all the roads which ran parallel to the main north-south route ended with the same resigned sentence: 'Here too, nothing's moving!' … None of the marching groups managed more than 8km.[12]

Conditions for Vormann's corps were no better, as the men of 14th Panzer Division found:

> The men in the front line soon resembled walking lumps of clay. Their worn footwear, their tattered uniforms and tarpaulins gave inadequate protection against the damp that penetrated from all sides, and at night often literally froze to their bodies. It was no surprise that casualties through illness soon rose alarmingly. A good rotation system, which was the only remedy or could at least have reduced the burden a little, was impossible as the forces required for this were unavailable. Since the costly fighting near Kirovograd the division had received almost no replacements and the few men who had been made available by 'combing out' rear area units couldn't fill the gaps in the ranks. Most of them were not up to the burden they faced, and after just a few days they faded away. The replacement battalions and regiments, which trained replacement drafts in Dresden and Leisnig, were either directed to other divisions whilst en route for the front or held back until the situation became clearer.

> Just as the manpower had to deal with the situation, the continued burden on equipment was no less severe. Weapons and other equipment often failed to work. Wheeled vehicles were left stranded. Only the tanks, tractors and *Maultiere* [‘mules’, often used to describe motorised prime movers] were ultimately still mobile. Even half-tracks had their tracks sucked off by the clinging mud.[13]

Both Soviet and German accounts frequently blamed the weather for setbacks during the fighting on the Eastern Front, but the early and unseasonal thaw could not have come at a worse moment for the Germans. Grimly, III Panzer Corps continued its advance, though at a far slower rate. To add insult to injury, the increasingly wet weather grounded much of the Luftwaffe, reducing air support, reconnaissance and supply flights. A specialised road construction battalion was assigned to Breith’s command and local Ukrainians were press-ganged into labour squads to help try to improve the roads. As they struggled forward, Breith’s armoured units began to encounter increasingly strong Soviet defences; although the strength of the German assault the previous day appears to have taken Vatutin a little by surprise, he now reacted by dispatching V Mechanised Corps and V Guards Tank Corps to block the relief effort. The wide tracks of the Panthers and Tigers of Bäke’s regiment provided welcome mobility as resistance increased. Bäke later described how he managed to overcome resistance in his path:

> A strong enemy defensive front between two gorges lay in front of the regiment, across our direction of attack. This front was roughly 800–1,000m long. A frontal attack would lead to heavy losses, so I decided to make a feint attack at 0600 to tie down the enemy. As it grew light I sent the Panther battalion in a large arc past the enemy’s left flank at the edge of the ravine to the east, until they were in his rear. At about 0830 the Panther battalion attacked from the rear and achieved total surprise. This was followed by a frontal attack by the Tiger battalion and 16th Panzer Division’s reconnaissance battalion.[14]

This success, in which the German tank crews claimed to have destroyed 31 tanks, appeared to open the way to the encircled troops, but as Bäke’s men approached the Gniloy Tikysh River, the only large bridge in the area was destroyed by the retreating Soviet soldiers. The river was not large – perhaps just 20m wide at this point – but it was impossible for the heavy Tigers and Panthers to wade across. There is nothing to suggest that bridging difficulties had received special attention from the planners of *Wanda* – unsurprising, given the speed with which the operation was mounted – and none of the Wehrmacht's bridging units had been assigned to III Panzer Corps. In the face of stiffening Soviet resistance, appallingly muddy terrain and the impassable Gniloy Tikysh, the German advance came to an abrupt halt.

The final division that was still awaited by the two German forces attempting to reach the Korsun pocket was 24th Panzer Division. It had been assigned to XLVII Panzer Corps and, once it arrived, Vormann hoped that he would be able to break through to the encirclement from the south, or at least draw off sufficient Soviet strength from the units in front of III Panzer Corps that the latter would be able to reach *Gruppe Stemmermann*. It was normal for panzer divisions to be redeployed by rail, but a lack of appropriate railway lines and rolling stock meant that 24th Panzer Division would have to travel by road. Leaving the Nikopol area on 28 January, much of the division reached Krivoy Rog by the end of the day, a journey of 45 miles (75km). But the leading elements inflicted considerable damage on the rapidly thawing roads and other units that were following found conditions almost impossible. The division's engineers were in constant demand to try to restore roads and bridges, and fuel consumption soared as engines strained to drive vehicles forward through the clinging mess. Dozens of vehicles had to be abandoned and some of 24th Panzer Division's supply elements didn't even begin the journey as the roads were now so bad that travel was almost impossible.

Even by the muddy standards experienced by III Panzer Corps, the attempted move of 24th Panzer Division was a nightmare. One panzergrenadier regiment reported that despite being mounted in half-tracks, it was forced to leave 50 of its 192 vehicles stranded along the road. One of the great strengths of panzer divisions throughout the war was their built-in engineering support, allowing damaged and broken-down vehicles to be returned to service quickly, but these engineering assets were themselves stuck far to the rear, meaning that even small amounts of damage to vehicles couldn't be rectified. On 3 February, the division diary recorded:

> The intention to attack the weak enemy forces in Malyi Yekaterinopol today with an armoured attack towards the north and to recapture the railway line could not be realised, as the tanks could not be moved forward in a timely manner across roads that were impassable even for those vehicles.[15]

In order to try to prevent the Germans from concentrating their forces for a counteroffensive, Zhukov had urged 3rd and 4th Ukrainian Fronts to maintain pressure elsewhere. To a large extent, these attacks achieved little, but even as 24th Panzer Division struggled north, 3rd Ukrainian Front launched fresh assaults against the Nikopol bridgehead. On 4 February, the attack by 24th Panzer Division towards Stemmermann's troops finally began and the leading elements of the armoured battlegroup pushed forward perhaps a mile against relatively weak resistance, encountering three Soviet tanks which were swiftly destroyed, only to be ordered to halt. Hitler had belatedly become aware of the redeployment of the division and demanded that it be returned to its previous positions in order to protect the Nikopol bridgehead.

After such a difficult approach march, it seemed ridiculous to the men in the front line and nearby headquarters for 24th Panzer Division's attack to be abandoned after just a couple of hours. Speidel argued strenuously with Busse, pleading for the panzer division to be allowed to proceed with its attack. His biting comments that the division had been ordered north by Manstein himself and that it could not possibly return to the Nikopol region in time to make much of a difference were in vain. Not for the first time, Busse insisted Hitler's orders had to be obeyed. The mood amongst the troops of 24th Panzer Division can only be imagined as they grimly turned and headed south. If the roads had been bad before, they were now immeasurably worse after the damage done during the march north. Over half the wheeled and tracked strength of the division was lost at least temporarily during the two redeployments, not least because, as the division's supply assets had been unable to move north, vehicles began to run out of fuel and had to be left behind.

In addition to the attack on the Nikopol bridgehead, Soviet troops – this time from Forty-Sixth Army – made a powerful attack towards Krivoy Rog, further to the west. If this advance continued, there was a high likelihood that the German Sixth Army would be cut off in the lower Dnepr region, and it therefore seems that the removal of 24th Panzer Division from this southern sector was a major gamble, regardless of the exigencies of rescuing *Gruppe Stemmermann*. Manstein had originally intended to replace the division in the Nikopol bridgehead with an infantry division but this replacement division had not yet appeared, not least because the entire Wehrmacht had so little by way of reserves and *Führerbefehl 51* prevented the transfer of any units from the west. Slightly belatedly, Manstein asked Wöhler if he could release 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division; although this would weaken his line, Wöhler was prepared to take the risk, and Manstein sent a signal to *OKH* suggesting that rather than sending 24th Panzer Division back to the south, he would send the parachute division. Even though it had not recovered from the mauling it received in the fighting near Kirovograd, 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division was a suitable alternative, not least because Sixth Army had already signalled that it would prefer to receive an infantry division rather than a panzer division. The response from *OKH* was a flat refusal: Hitler had made up his mind and would not accept any alternative arrangement. The Führer believed – with some justification – that an infantry unit would lack the mobility to intervene in the multitude of crises developing to the southeast. Under heavy attack, the German defenders of the Nikopol bridgehead fell back, albeit in good order, to and through the city and escaped to the west bank. The bridgehead that Hitler had deemed vital for Germany's war effort (though as described above, Speer and others regarded it as far from essential) was abandoned even before 24th Panzer Division could return to the area.

Regardless of the arguments between Manstein and Hitler about the redeployment of 24th Panzer Division, the diary of Sixth Army leaves no doubt that the division's temporary removal to the north came at a singularly inopportune moment, even though the army had informed Manstein that it would accept an infantry division as a replacement:

> The combat capacity of Sixth Army was affected in a definitive manner when on 28 January, two days before the beginning of the Soviet breakthrough attack, 24th Panzer Division was called away and sent off on a 310km [186-mile] march because of a change in situation on the right wing of First Panzer Army. As a result the strongest link in the chain of the army reserve was removed without it being possible to replace it in time with another of anywhere near equal strength. In addition to this, the road conditions were already such that movement could only be carried out at speeds of about 10mph. In the case of 24th Panzer Division there was no guarantee that it would arrive at its destination on time with all its elements.
>
> … [Even after Manstein's request to abandon the Nikopol bridgehead and the Dnepr bend had been rejected by Hitler], Sixth Army's operational capabilities fundamentally still promised success in defensive fighting. 24th Panzer Division at Ivanovka and the armoured reserve group at Marevka lay like a protecting wall immediately behind the sector against which the Soviet main attack was directed. When the Soviet IV Guards Mechanised Corps broke through on 1 February it would have been squarely in front of the guns of 24th Panzer Division without the latter having to move a foot in the deep mud. As a result of the forced removal of 24th Panzer Division and of two other smaller units two days before the beginning of the [Soviet] attack, the backbone of the army's northern front was broken at the decisive moment.[16]

An officer of the division later commented:

> As a result of this venture, a division which had come to Nikopol in November [at] almost 100 per cent … strength and had lost in two months of battle only about 3 per cent of its strength, now lost more than 50 per cent.[17]

It is tempting to speculate whether 24th Panzer Division could have revived XLVII Panzer Corps' attempts to reach the encirclement. Had the division been able to assemble at full strength, it is feasible that it might have been able to force its way through the Soviet defences, but given the movement difficulties experienced by all sides, such a concentration was probably unachievable. It seems likely that it would have been brought to a halt in the swampy terrain and tied down by Soviet counterattacks, making it unavailable for use elsewhere. And this, fundamentally, was the problem that confronted Manstein. Even if he could concentrate sufficient forces at any one point in Army Group South to exert pressure upon his opponents, this was only possible by weakening the line elsewhere, and with its superior resources, the Red Army could always exploit such weaknesses. Had the division remained in its original position, it would have been able to intervene against the local Soviet attacks with some effect. For it to waste its strength on two long marches was the worst possible outcome.

The superior resources of the Red Army were about to make themselves felt. Vatutin had already begun to move units to stop the advance of the German III Panzer Corps, and at the urging of Zhukov he now took further measures. Lieutenant General Semen Ilyich Bogdanov's Second Tank Army was part of Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front, operating on its northern wing, and was ordered to make haste to the south. The two tank corps of Bogdanov's army were both far from full strength, with barely 100 tanks between them, but they effectively doubled Soviet tank strength in the critical sector and were ordered to take up positions to strike into the northern flank of III Panzer Corps. They began to move into position late on 5 February. The following day, as the thaw continued, bitter fighting raged along the entire sector as the German divisions fought off repeated Soviet infantry and tank attacks. The leading elements of 1st Panzer Division and *LSSAH* began to arrive but, far from being able to restore impetus to the German attack, they found themselves needed to prevent Soviet counterattacks breaking into the rear area of III Panzer Corps. *LSSAH* was assigned to protect the northern flank of the German force, placing it directly opposite Bogdanov's Second Tank Army.

At this stage of the operation, Manstein began to doubt that III Panzer Corps would have sufficient strength – and, perhaps more importantly, mobility – to reach Medvin, and late on 5 February he discussed the matter with Hube. The latter, who had doubted the success of the operation earlier, was now far more enthusiastic, particularly after the success that Bäke had enjoyed in overcoming a strong Soviet defensive line. The total strength of III Panzer Corps was greater than that used to such good effect in *Watutin*, he argued, and given the modest distance required for success, it was worth persevering with *Wanda*, but this line of thought ignored an important fact: the terrain over which *Watutin* was conducted was far better for armoured warfare, particularly as the open landscape had favoured the long range of the German tank guns and the ground had remained frozen throughout. In the closer terrain to the southwest of the Gniloy Tikysh, and of course with the river itself creating a formidable barrier to Bäke's armour, success was far less likely. Wenck and Speidel, the chiefs of staff at First Panzer Army and Eighth Army, had also expressed reservations about the prospect of success of the original proposal. Originally, it had been Manstein's intention to fight his way through to the pocket while the encircled German troops waited to link up with them, but it was now abundantly clear that it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for either Breith or Vormann to reach the encirclement unaided. In December 1942, Manstein had watched while the German 6th Panzer Division advanced to within 30 miles (48km) of the Stalingrad perimeter and how any lingering hope of saving the encircled troops was ended by Hitler's refusal to allow the trapped Sixth Army to break out to the west, and on this occasion he had no intention of allowing a similar situation to arise. As early as 3 February, Manstein informed Wöhler that, if necessary, he would order a breakout on his own responsibility, regardless of any orders from Hitler.[18]

Despite Hube's optimism, Manstein could see clearly that III Panzer Corps – representing the most powerful concentration of armour that the Wehrmacht could achieve at this stage of the war – had been unable to break through and turned his thoughts to a revised plan. Instead of continuing to try to reach Medvin, III Panzer Corps was to limit its operations towards the north and would seek to destroy all Soviet armour to the west of the Gniloy Tikysh. The new main point of effort would consist of 17th Panzer Division, with Bäke's regiment on its northern flank. The force was to turn to the east to cross the river and proceed directly towards the pocket. At the same time, contrary to Hitler's express orders that the pocket was to be held and used as the basis for attempts to recapture Kiev and to restore the line of the Dnepr, *Gruppe Stemmermann* was to prepare to break out as soon as III Panzer Corps was within reach.[19] Once the pocket had been successfully evacuated, III Panzer Corps and XLVII Panzer Corps would attack towards each other in order to establish a new front line.

On 7 February, the German forces still trying to destroy Soviet armour west of the Gniloy Tikysh made almost no headway and came under increasing pressure from the Red Army's units. Otroschenkov and his fellow tank crewmen were involved in the battles with the German armour:

> Our brigade was put in the outer front of the encirclement, defending near the village of Lysyanka. The enemy tried to break through to reach the surrounded group. It was February in Ukraine, with slime and slush everywhere. The fertile black soil turned to greasy, sticky, black mud. If the tank got stuck in this morass, it took a lot of effort to get it out. The caterpillar tracks would churn away to no avail if the tank was grounded on its belly, and without a tractor it couldn't be recovered. And when, with a huge effort, it was possible to pull the tank onto solid ground, it left a huge hole filled with water. Even as we drove away, ducks were already swimming there. Hundreds of kilograms of earth clung to the bottom of the tank.
>
> It must be said that the German tanks, particularly the heavy ones, had far worse cross-country performance than the T-34s. And as the enemy couldn't cross the fields and could only move along roads, we usually decided to ambush them. We deployed our tanks near the road and camouflaged them behind bushes in folds in the terrain, often partially burying them, and assigned sectors for surveillance and fire to each one. I told the guys to fire only at my command. At that time we had 76mm guns. It made no sense to risk a long-range shot from an ambush position. We had to ensure we had the range calculated and we waited for the enemy to come close to be certain of setting him ablaze. When the first German tank approached to within 300m, I gave the command. Senior Lieutenant Seryozha Saltykov knocked him out, actually at point-blank range. The tanks that were following tried to get around the wrecked, motionless Tiger, and bottomed out in the mud. Stationary tanks were sitting ducks. We fired quickly and about ten were already burning fiercely when the rear tanks turned and got away.[20]

There were Tiger tanks operating within III Panzer Corps, but it should be remembered that soldiers on all sides often described their opponents as having particularly formidable equipment. Nevertheless, this account shows the importance of the few roads in the area, and the manner in which they allowed the Soviet forces to anticipate with great accuracy the avenues of attack of their enemies.

In addition to his two tank corps, Bogdanov was given control of neighbouring Soviet infantry and tank units, resulting in increasing coordination, including V Guards Tank Corps from Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army. By the end of the day, any question of continuing the previous plan to advance to Medvin in order to destroy Soviet armoured forces and to take advantage of the best roads in the area had disappeared. It was also clear to everyone that time was running out for the encircled troops, and it was questionable whether they would be able to hold out until the German tanks reached them – calculations showed that, even if the Luftwaffe was able to operate flights uninterrupted by the weather or enemy action, *Gruppe Stemmermann* would start to run out of supplies in the second and third weeks of February, and the experience of Stalingrad showed that, once supplies ran short, the fighting strength of the encircled men would diminish rapidly.

Within the pocket, Stemmermann – who was officially given control both of his corps and Lieb's units on 7 February – began to draw up orders to prepare for two eventualities. The first and less likely was codenamed *Frühlingsglaube* ('Belief in spring') and called for XI Corps to attack south in order to link up with Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps; given the weakened state of Vormann's divisions, it was highly unlikely that they would be able to approach close enough to the pocket for such an operation to succeed. Rather more promising was *Betriebsurlaub* ('Bank holiday'), which would see the two encircled corps fighting their way west or southwest to link up with III Panzer Corps. It was explicit that this would involve abandoning the pocket and leaving behind much of the heavy equipment of the encircled divisions. The decision to give overall command of the encircled troops to Stemmermann was based upon his seniority over Lieb, but before the decision was made, Wöhler had sent a liaison officer into the encirclement by air to speak to the two generals. This officer reported back that Stemmermann appeared deeply affected by the losses his men had suffered and was fully aware of the seriousness of the situation; by contrast, Lieb appeared more confident and positive, but didn't appear to have the same degree of understanding about the severity of the overall situation. It was also clear that XLII Corps was far stronger than XI Corps, particularly as *SS-Wiking* had been transferred from the latter to the former. Nonetheless, Stemmermann now took overall command within the encirclement.[21]

At the same time, Breith began to redeploy his divisions for their renewed attack. The roads that they had used to drive north towards Medvin were now the route over which the same units attempted to pull back, but constant Soviet pressure made it almost impossible to begin the redeployment on 8 February. Hube continued to cling to the hope that the original plan would succeed, and objected strenuously to Manstein's plans on the grounds that it would be necessary for much of III Panzer Corps to remain to the west of the Gniloy Tikysh, thus reducing cooperation between the divisions. By contrast, Wenck, First Panzer Army's chief of staff, had no doubt that the original attack had no chance of success. He had attempted to visit the leading units and had seen first-hand the state of the roads and terrain.[22] In order to ensure that his plans were followed, Manstein telephoned Hube late on 8 February and issued unequivocal instructions. The salient that had been won in the initial advance towards Medvin was to be largely abandoned. By the time that Hitler became aware of the new plans, troop movements had already commenced and on this occasion – perhaps aware of the disastrous waste of resources and energy that resulted from his countermanding the deployment of 24th Panzer Division – the Führer opted to give his consent.

For Vatutin and Zhukov, news of the withdrawal of III Panzer Corps came as a welcome development. The two men had concentrated considerable armoured resources in the area and despite suffering far heavier tank losses than the Germans, both men knew that these losses could easily be made good. By contrast, III Panzer Corps had fewer than half the tanks with which it had started the operation, though many of the missing vehicles would return to service in the coming days. But even as the Soviet commanders turned their attention to crushing the encircled troops, III Panzer Corps began to take up positions for its second relief attempt, showing far more resilience than the Red Army had expected. There is little evidence to suggest that the Red Army interpreted the German withdrawal as the prelude to a renewed attempt, but Vatutin and Zhukov were aware that there was still a strong likelihood that the Wehrmacht would make one further attempt, and the only question was when and where the next attack would be made.

Even before a breakout could be attempted by *Gruppe Stemmermann*, it was necessary to take up favourable positions. This would involve the encircled troops abandoning the northern and eastern sectors of the pocket whilst simultaneously securing ground to the southwest. Manstein's bitter memories of late December 1942 must have been revived when he received information from Stemmermann that the average combat strength of the infantry regiments in the encirclement had fallen to just 150 men or about 10 per cent of their establishment, and that fuel and ammunition was far less than what would be required for a breakout. During the fighting in and around Stalingrad, Paulus had lamented that his Sixth Army lacked the fuel to reach 6th Panzer Division and Hitler had used this as an excuse to refuse permission for a breakout, but on this occasion it seems that Manstein did not forward the information sent by Stemmermann to *OKH*.

Additionally, Paulus and Stemmermann were very different personalities. The commander of Sixth Army had repeatedly shown an aversion to doing anything without the express permission of Hitler; Stemmermann was anxious to extract his men from the encirclement and would seize whatever opportunity was presented, as the alternative was death or imprisonment.

With Vormann's corps – deprived of 24th Panzer Division – unable to approach the encirclement from the south, the only hope for *Gruppe Stemmermann* lay with *Betriebsurlaub*, or a link-up with III Panzer Corps. In preparation for this, the first step for Stemmermann's men was to recapture the small town of Shanderovka. The Red Army seized the town on 9 February as XLII Corps pulled back in expectation of a relief operation breaking through from the direction of Medvin to the west, and Otroschenkov's battalion was heavily involved in the battle:

> The Germans had up to 600 artillery pieces in Shanderovka. We attacked the village without success, running into dense fire and losing several tanks. Our battalion commander was wounded and after the engagement there were only five or six tanks left in the battalion. Rotmistrov, Polozkov [commander of XVIII Tank Corps], and another general drove up to the brigade. They evaluated the situation and ordered us to occupy the nearby village of Komarovka and the nearby high ground, and to penetrate into Shanderovka from that direction. The brigade commander ordered me to take the remnants of the battalion and complete this task. We drove the Germans out of Komarovka quickly, and also from the hill … the following morning we attacked Shanderovka again from this direction and took it.[23]

It is doubtful that the Germans had concentrated 600 guns in Shanderovka, but with the village in Soviet hands, a counterattack was urgently required to aid an eventual attempt to break out to the west. Stemmermann ordered his most battle-worthy units – 72nd Infantry Division and elements of *SS-Wiking* and *SS-Wallonien* – to lead the attack. Preparations began just hours after Shanderovka had been abandoned. The roads within the encirclement were as muddy and degraded as those used by III and XLVII Panzer Corps and Stemmermann's intention was to launch his attack on 10 February, but the plan had to be postponed by a day to allow the forces – including what remained of *Kampfgruppe von Brese*, which had been separated from 14th Panzer Division during Rotmistrov's breakthrough and had retreated into the encirclement – to complete their redeployment. In addition, the shortages of fuel had reached the stage that

Stemmermann and Lieb advised higher commands that this factor was also delaying redeployment. Labouring through the sticky mud, the hungry, lice-ridden infantrymen could cover barely 1km per hour, and the slow-moving columns of troops and vehicles were repeatedly attacked by Soviet aircraft. Until this stage of the war, it was normal practice for Soviet ground attack aircraft to make their run perpendicular to the column they were attacking, resulting in just one or two vehicles being hit by their fire, but during the fighting around Korsun Soviet pilots started to adopt the practice of German and western pilots, flying along the stranded columns and thus striking far more targets.

With a few exceptions, the units of *Gruppe Stemmermann* showed a remarkable degree of calm during this redeployment. By this stage of the fighting, all of the soldiers knew that their situation was precarious, but a strong sense of responsibility for their comrades appears to have prevailed and the incidents of apathy and hopelessness that were reported immediately after the encirclement was established seem to have disappeared. An exception was a battalion of *SS-Wiking* that fell back in the southeast part of the encirclement on 9 February. The exhausted men – most of them relatively recent arrivals on the Eastern Front – were almost overwhelmed by a Soviet attack and the survivors rallied in a small area of woodland. A determined counterattack managed to restore the situation, allowing for the evacuation of the town of Gorodishche, in particular the substantial supplies held there and several hundred wounded, but Stemmermann was critical of the performance of *SS-Wiking*, informing Wöhler that the withdrawal had been caused by poor leadership and supervision.[24] This was an unfair judgement of exhausted, hungry men, and *SS-Wallonien*, which had also been forced to pull back when its flank was exposed by the unauthorised withdrawal, held off the Soviet forces for the next two days before abandoning the last of its vehicles and withdrawing northwest. The Red Army was struggling just as much with conditions and made an attempt to cut off the rearguard of *SS-Wallonien* and a small group of men, led by Hauptsturmführer Gommaire Anthonissen, succeeded in reopening the line of retreat. Further Soviet attacks followed and Anthonissen and the few men who were left with him were overwhelmed, but sufficient time was gained for the rearguard to complete its withdrawal.[25]

On 10 February, Wöhler contacted the two corps commanders in the pocket to ask their views on the best direction for a breakout. By this stage it was surely clear to everyone that the only hope for success lay in an attempt towards III Panzer Corps, but Wöhler seems to have held out hope that Vormann would still be able to reach the encirclement. Stemmermann was pessimistic about the remaining strength available to him, with a particularly low estimation of the state of XLII Corps, and Lieb was similarly disparaging about Stemmermann's XI Corps, advising Eighth Army headquarters that the units of XI Corps were too weak to establish a new defensive line to the east. Despite the mixed messages from the commanders in the encirclement, Wöhler made his decision: the best hope was to pursue *Betriebsurlaub* and conduct a breakout towards Lysyanka, where it was hoped III Panzer Corps would link up with the encircled men.[26]

It must have been tempting for the encircling Soviet units – and more importantly, for the Front commanders – to interpret the contraction of the encirclement as a sign that it was beginning to collapse. On 9 February, Zhukov sent a signal to Stalin:

> According to the testimony of prisoners, the enemy suffered heavy losses during the battles leading up to the encirclement. There is confusion, in some cases panic, amongst the soldiers and their officers.
>
> According to intelligence data … the enemy is preparing for a final attempt to break through to meet [III Panzer Corps] … To block this, we are withdrawing one tank brigade from Rotmistrov in the Lysyanka area and 340th Rifle Division from Zhmachenko.
>
> The armies of Koroteev, Ryzhov and Trofimenko continue their attacks.
>
> On 8 February at 1550, our parliamentaires … handed an ultimatum to the surrounded enemy.[27]

From the point of view of the Red Army, the attempts by III and XLVII Panzer Corps to reach the encirclement had been defeated and the surrender of the pocket was almost inevitable – even if a renewed attempt was made by either German panzer corps, the Red Army's defences would surely be strong enough to defeat it. But despite Zhukov's disparaging assessment of German morale, whilst a small number of men who had been serving in rear area units may have deserted or surrendered, the front-line soldiers of the two encircled corps remained loyal. An official approach by envoys from Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front on 8 February gave the men in the pocket 24 hours to lay down their arms; at this stage, III Panzer Corps had only just stopped its attempts to reach Medvin and it wasn't yet clear that the relief effort had failed. The terms were rejected, and after being given lavish amounts of brandy – an attempt to show them that the pocket's supplies were still plentiful – the Soviet emissaries were permitted to return to their lines.

The Red Army took other measures to try to induce individuals and small groups to lay down their arms. Leaflets were dropped into the encirclement offering favourable terms for men who surrendered. Such approaches had been made in the past, including many occasions when German troops weren't encircled, with no significant effect, and this approach too proved to be ineffective. After the surrender of Paulus' Sixth Army in Stalingrad, several captured German officers had formed the *Bund Deutscher Offiziere* ('League of German Officers' or *BDO*) and had produced a variety of leaflets and letters, telling German officers and soldiers that Hitler was leading Germany to disaster; Generalmajor Otto Korfes, the joint founder of the *BDO*, had commanded 295th Infantry Division prior to its surrender in Stalingrad and he now sent a personal letter to Brigadeführer Herbert Gille, commander of *SS-Wiking*. This was not the first time that a member of the *BDO* had made a personal approach to the commander of a front-line formation, but this was slightly unusual in that Korfes assured Gille that he and his men would receive good treatment despite being members of the hated SS. The letter added that former members of the SS were already fighting alongside the Red Army, a claim that was greeted with scorn. By this stage of the war, it was clear to SS personnel that, regardless of their personal involvement in atrocities, the conduct of German troops in the Soviet Union had left little appetite for mercy amongst the soldiers of the Red Army. SS personnel in particular knew that they were unlikely to survive capture, and the notion that former SS troops were fighting for the Soviet Union was unthinkable.

Zhukov correctly assessed the rejection of the calls for surrender as confirmation that the Germans would make at least one more effort to rescue the encircled units. Pressure was maintained all around the pocket in an attempt, largely unsuccessful, to take advantage of Stemmermann's withdrawals; briefly, there appeared to be an opportunity to encircle Gorodishche, but the German 57th Infantry Division and *SS-Wiking* succeeded in pulling out at the last moment. However, there was insufficient time to evacuate the remaining wounded who had gathered in the town. At the end of January, the Germans claimed to have intercepted a radio message sent by Stalin instructing the Soviet troops that only lightly wounded men were to be taken prisoner – those with more serious wounds, and all *Hiwis* (*Hilfswilliger*, or 'volunteers', i.e. former Red Army soldiers who were serving with varying degrees of willingness as drivers, labourers, and sometimes as combatants with the Wehrmacht) were to be executed.[28] Neither the Red Army nor the Wehrmacht had a good record when it came to the treatment of prisoners, particularly the wounded, who fell into their hands, and it is likely that many of those who were captured in Gorodishche were killed immediately. But the Germans had no intention of leaving the encircled troops, wounded or otherwise, to the mercy of the Red Army. The climax of the battle was rapidly approaching.

CHAPTER 5

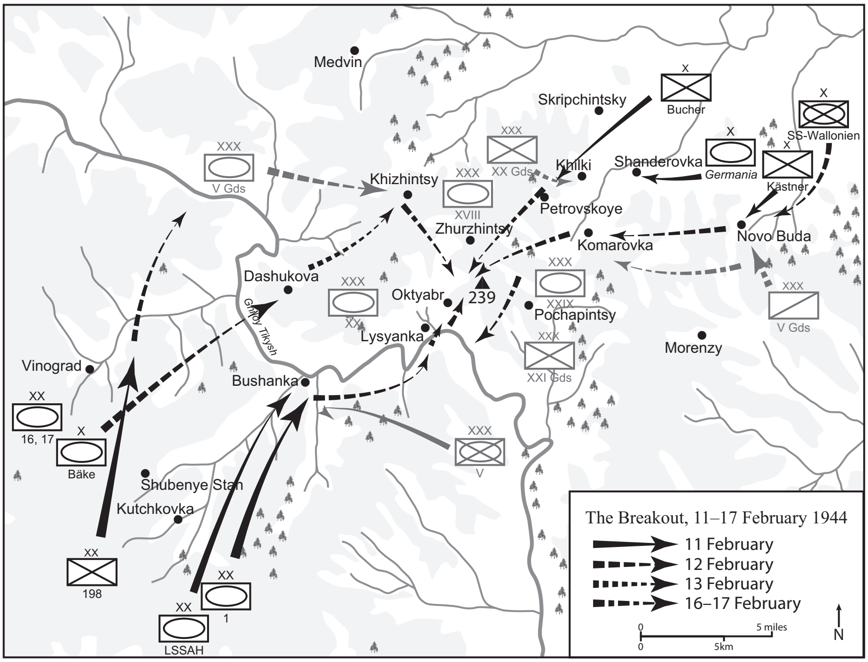
MUD, SNOW AND HILL 239

Fighting between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army was almost invariably the toughest of contests, but intense combat in terrible winter conditions placed a huge strain upon men, machines and organisations. Even if they didn't have a clear idea of the overall situation, the ordinary soldiers on both sides would have been aware of the great importance of the current battle. If they could destroy the encircled German units, the men of the Red Army would succeed in emulating their comrades who had crushed the Germans at Stalingrad. For the Germans, escape from the encirclement was vital for survival – personal and on a larger scale. Nonetheless, both sides needed to take a breath and reorganise.

Preparations to make a final attempt to rescue *Gruppe Stemmermann* continued both inside and outside the pocket. III Panzer Corps slowly pulled out of the salient it had secured in its initial attack, and some Soviet commanders must have believed that this was clear evidence that the Germans had been defeated, though others correctly calculated that the panzer divisions were regrouping for a second, more direct attempt. Manstein held discussions with Hube and Wenck on 9 February. Despite his misgivings that First Panzer Army's revised plan would leave the panzer divisions in too tight a corridor, Manstein approved Hube's and Wenck's proposals with minor alterations. The attack would be led by 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions, reinforced by Bäke's regiment. The right flank would be protected by 1st Panzer Division, with *LSSAH* covering to the north. The remaining elements of 1st Panzer Division arrived over the next two days, providing a welcome boost in strength. However, there were considerable areas of concern. The flanks of the new line of advance – particularly to the north – would be vulnerable to Soviet counterattacks, particularly as *LSSAH* remained far below its establishment strength. There was a general weakness in infantry, and although the divisions of III Panzer Corps appeared to have significant artillery assets, these were largely stranded in mud and only a limited proportion would be available. Similarly, the movement of trucks carrying ammunition for the artillery was also a constant problem. An additional concern was that the planned line of march would lead to Lysyanka, where there were two bridges over the Gniloy Tikysh – these would be vital for the continued advance to link up with the encirclement, particularly as bridging units were still stuck far to the rear. Breith was doubtful that his units would be able to achieve the required advance and he suggested that the terrain difficulties that his units faced were such that it might be better to concentrate on driving forward with Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps from the south; this suggestion was rejected, as there simply wasn't enough time to move troops, tanks and equipment to restore Vormann's divisions to sufficient strength for such an effort. Nevertheless, Vormann was ordered to do whatever he could to tie down Soviet forces facing his corps, in order to make III Panzer Corps' task easier. Given that 3rd, 13th and 14th Panzer Divisions had just 17 tanks and assault guns between them, it was highly questionable whether XLVII Panzer Corps would be able to achieve much, but 11th Panzer Division was tasked with trying to advance towards Zvenigorodka from the south.

Vormann's troops commenced their attacks on the morning of 11 February. An initial attack saw 11th Panzer Division push forward over the Shpola River near Yerki. Reinforced by 13th Panzer Division – in reality, no more than a small battlegroup – the advance continued slowly. At the same time, Breith launched his attack from the west, preceded by a brief artillery bombardment and Stuka attack. The infantry of 198th Infantry Division rapidly seized the villages of Shubenye Stan and Kutchkovka and moved towards Vinograd, thus securing the northern shoulder of the attack, and a little to the south the main thrust, led by 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions, made rapid progress towards Bushanka. The southern flank of the thrust was meant to be protected by 1st Panzer Division, but when they advanced, the men of Generalmajor Richard Koll's division found that there was little resistance in their path and rapidly reached Bushanka. It was an encouraging start, and 1st Panzer Division drew up plans to continue its advance after dark with the intention of pressing on to Lysyanka as quickly as possible.

Late on 11 February, the troops within the pocket that had been tasked with capturing Shanderovka began their attack; after days of struggling through bottomless mud, the Germans were relieved when the temperature dropped below zero and snow began to fall, offering firmer ground for their advance and a degree of cover. There was insufficient artillery ammunition for any significant preparatory bombardment, and Stemmermann ordered that the main attack and the supporting operations on its flanks were to be made at night. A battalion from the *Germania* regiment of *SS-Wiking* approached Shanderovka from the south, using a narrow gully for cover. The Germans rapidly penetrated into the town, where bitter fighting continued at close range for most of the night. By dawn on 12 February, Sturmbannführer Hans Dorr, the commander of the *Germania* battalion, reported that he had secured the southern half of Shanderovka. The Soviet defences in the northern part of the town were too strong for a daytime attack to succeed and Dorr opted to wait until darkness before pressing on. For several hours, the attack foundered in the face of heavy machine-gun fire before an enterprising company commander managed to penetrate the defences and silence several guns. Having secured the town, the Germans were now faced by repeated Soviet counterattacks and there were several difficult moments, particularly whenever Soviet tanks appeared – instead of accompanying the attack on Shanderovka, the remaining tanks of *SS-Wiking* had been diverted elsewhere to deal with Soviet penetrations in the perimeter of the pocket.


Medvin
Skripchintsky
X
Bucher
X
SS-Wallonien
XXX
V Gds
Khizhintsy
XXX
XX Gds
Khilki
Shanderovka
X
Germania
X
Kästner
XXX
XVIII
Petrovskoye
Zhurzhintsy
Komarovka
Novo Buda
Dashukova
XXX
XI
Oktyabr
239
XXX
XXIX
Pochapintsy
XXX
V Gds
Gniloy Tikysh
Lysyanka
XXX
XXI Gds
Morenzy
Vinograd
Bushanka
XX
16, 17
X
Bäke
XXX
V
Shubenye Stan
Kutchkovka
XX
198
XX
1
XX
LSSAH
The Breakout, 11–17 February 1944
11 February
12 February
13 February
16–17 February
0
5 miles
0
5km
N

To the north of Shanderovka, a mixed battlegroup built around units from *Korps Abteilung B* enjoyed a somewhat easier advance on 11 February, particularly at first. The group was able to penetrate the Soviet lines by moving forward along a small valley and captured first the village of Skripchintsky and then Khilki, an overall advance of perhaps six miles (10km). Buoyed by its initial success, the group – under the command of Oberst Wolfgang Bucher – pressed on confidently towards Petrovskoye. Here, its first attack overran the eastern half of the village before a powerful Soviet counterattack threw the Germans back towards Khilki.

A third German column, consisting of a regiment from 72nd Infantry Division and an improvised battalion of rear area troops, and commanded by Oberstleutnant Robert Kästner, attacked south of Shanderovka. The Soviet defences in this area were believed to be strong, and without considerable artillery support a daytime attack would have no chance of success. Stemmermann's instructions for the attack to be made at night were therefore carried out and Kästner led his men forward late on 11 February, taking the Soviet defenders by surprise and rapidly penetrating into and through their positions. The advance continued onto a nearby hill, from where Kästner's men were able to destroy a Soviet column heading towards Shanderovka, using two 20mm anti-aircraft guns. Keen to build on this success, Kästner pushed on to Novo Buda, where the small Soviet garrison was taken by surprise and swiftly overwhelmed. Anticipating Soviet counterattacks, he now ordered his few supporting heavy weapons to be brought forward in order to defend these gains.

Given that they had expected the imminent collapse of the pocket, many Soviet commanders were taken by surprise by the energy of the German attack from within the encirclement – some like Zhukov and Vatutin might have anticipated an attempt to break out to the west, but they had expected this to be a relatively weak, despairing bid before the final surrender. Like the Germans, the Red Army's units were struggling to get supplies to their front-line formations, and the effective combat strength of the tank corps of the tank armies and the divisions of V Guards Cavalry Corps was greatly reduced by a lack of ammunition and fuel. Throughout 12 February, as the temperature rose above freezing again and rain turned the ground into a sea of mud once more, there were isolated attacks on the positions that Stemmermann's troops had captured, but no coordinated attempt to crush the Germans; Zhukov still believed that despite their progress, the Germans were too far from the lines of III Panzer Corps to be able to escape. In their first abortive attempt to reach the encirclement, the divisions of Breith's III Panzer Corps had claimed the destruction of over 300 tanks – more than the combined strength of the Soviet forces before them – and there can be no doubt that they had inflicted considerable damage, but they too had suffered losses. Whilst both sides had been able to patch up some of their damaged tanks and return them to service, the Soviet units had received far more new replacement vehicles than the Germans. The balance of power surely still remained with the Red Army, though the renewed drive from III Panzer Corps was another unpleasant surprise for Vatutin and Zhukov.

Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army was in the path of III Panzer Corps and its V Guards Tank Corps and V Mechanised Corps attempted to eliminate the German forces that had reached Bushanka. Unusually for this sector, the ground over which the Soviet forces advanced was almost without cover, giving the Germans every advantage. The guns of their Tigers and Panthers were far more accurate than the 76mm and 85mm guns of Soviet tanks, not least because of superior gunsights, and the counterattack failed with the loss of over 30 tanks, without any German losses.[1] On the northern flank of III Panzer Corps, Vinograd was captured by the Germans late on 11 February, further protecting the northern shoulder of the thrust. At 0300 on 12 February, 1st Panzer Division attempted to capture Lysyanka; its troops encountered a strong Soviet defensive line of anti-tank guns and tanks but took it by surprise, destroying several T-34s and driving off the rest. Some of the advancing Panther tanks were brought to a halt by anti-tank mines but the rest of the battlegroup pressed on into the southern part of Lysyanka south of the Gniloy Tikysh, where heavy fighting broke out. Everything depended on the vital bridge in the town and Oberstleutnant Heinz-Werner Frank, commander of 1st Panzer Division's panzer regiment, ordered one of his company commanders to rush forward to capture the crossing before it could be destroyed. As the sky began to grow light, the small group of Panthers, supported by a handful of panzergrenadiers, pressed forward along the bank of the Gniloy Tikysh, only to have the bridge blown up just as they reached it. Nevertheless, the southern half of Lysyanka was in German hands. Despite coming under fire from Soviet guns and having several running skirmishes with stragglers, a German supply column reached the battlegroup during 12 February, and Frank's men took up defensive positions while they waited for reinforcements. A crossing over the Gniloy Tikysh was vital for the success of the operation – either another bridge would have to be captured, or the heavy bridging units would have to be brought forward to repair the crossing that 1st Panzer Division had narrowly failed to capture. Otherwise, it would not be possible for III Panzer Corps to advance closer to the encirclement.

Even as 1st Panzer Division was battling for Lysyanka, 11th Panzer Division tried to continue its advance towards Zvenigorodka. After receiving a small quantity of supplies by air, the Germans pushed on in the face of growing Soviet resistance. Towards the end of 12 February, the leading German tanks had reached high ground overlooking Zvenigorodka, but they could go no further and increasingly determined counterattacks brought XLVII Panzer Corps' advance to a halt. Wöhler repeatedly urged Vormann to continue his advance, but in the face of Soviet resistance and fuel shortages, the capture of Zvenigorodka was unachievable. By 14 February, 11th Panzer Division, despite being reinforced by the independent Panther regiment that had taken part in the earlier attacks towards Kapitanovka, was down to just three tanks; a further 55 tanks were strewn along its line of advance, variously disabled by enemy action, stranded in the mud, or the victims of mechanical failures.[2] For the personnel of 11th Panzer Division, the awareness that they could do no more was particularly painful. In December 1942, the division had operated behind the Chir River, to the north of the lower Don. Manstein had intended for it to cross the Don as part of the attempt to reach Stalingrad, but despite repeatedly inflicting major losses on the Soviet Fifth Tank Army in a series of encounter battles, the division was eventually levered back without being able to assist in the operation to rescue Paulus' Sixth Army. Now, 14 months later, the division's veterans once more faced bitter disappointment in their inability to reach another group of encircled comrades. On this occasion, the perimeter of the encirclement was less than six miles (10km) away, but 11th Panzer Division could do no more. Units from both Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army and Smirnov's Fourth Guards Army attacked Vormann's units, and they increasingly had their hands full just holding their positions. Under constant pressure from Manstein, Wöhler repeatedly urged Vormann to renew his advance, but despite the gap to the encirclement being so small, it was impossible to push forward.

Konev later wrote that he had expressed concerns that his contact with Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front was not as strong as he might wish and that the Germans might attempt to exploit this weakness in a breakout attempt. Accordingly on 8 February, three days before Stemmermann's attack began, he had ordered V Guards Cavalry Corps to take measures to tighten the seam with 1st Ukrainian Front and to hold back a cavalry division for use against a possible breakout.[3] However, it seems that the order to redeploy these units actually originated with Zhukov, not Konev. Despite these precautionary measures, Konev was determined to prevent the encircled troops from escaping and dispatched additional anti-tank units to reinforce Fourth Guards Army. Although the exhausted panzer divisions of XLVII Panzer Corps were unable to break the encirclement from the south, they continued to tie down the formations of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army; nevertheless, Konev believed that

XX Tank Corps was sufficiently far west to be available to block the breakout. Consequently, there was considerable confidence amongst senior Soviet commanders that a successful conclusion to the battle was at hand.

Despite this confidence, Stalin apparently thought otherwise. According to Konev, he contacted 2nd Ukrainian Front's commander at midday on 12 February:

> Angrily, Stalin said that we had told the entire world that a large enemy group was surrounded in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky area, but *Stavka* had evidence that the encircled men had broken through the lines of Twenty-Seventh Army and were moving towards their own forces [outside the encirclement]. He asked, 'What do you know about the situation in the neighbouring Front?'
>
> From his intonation and the harshness with which he spoke, I realised that the supreme commander was alarmed … on the basis of someone's inaccurate report. I replied, 'Don't worry, Comrade Stalin. The encircled enemy will not escape. My Front has taken measures. I have sent troops of Fifth Guards Tank Army and V Cavalry Corps to the area of the enemy's penetration to ensure union with 1st Ukrainian Front and to drive the enemy back into the encirclement. They are carrying out their mission successfully.'
>
> 'Did you do this on your own initiative?' asked Stalin. 'This is beyond the demarcation line of your Front.' I replied that I had. Stalin added, 'Good, I will consult and call you back.'[4]

About 15 minutes later, Stalin called back and asked Konev whether he could take command of all of the troops surrounding the pocket in order to improve coordination. Konev was unenthusiastic, pointing out that 1st Ukrainian Front's Twenty-Seventh Army was on the far side of the pocket and its lines of communication and supply ran far to the north. Stalin then suggested that Konev should take command of Twenty-Seventh Army and it would be the responsibility of 1st Ukrainian Front to continue supplying it, and to relay orders from Konev to the army, but Konev wrote that he remained unenthusiastic.

Zhukov's memoirs offer further details on events. He had taken to his bed with a fever and was summoned to the radio to speak to Stalin, shortly after the Soviet leader's discussion with Konev. Stalin demanded to know more about the German breakout attempt. After checking with Vatutin, Zhukov called him back:

> Stalin cursed Vatutin and me and then added, 'Konev proposes that he should be given command of the encirclement to eliminate the enemy's Korsun-Shevchenkovsy

> group, and that leadership of the external front [i.e. the troops facing outwards] be given to Vatutin.'
>
> I replied, 'The final destruction of the encircled enemy troops is a matter of three or four days. *The main role in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was played by 1st Ukrainian Front. Vatutin and the troops he leads will be offended if their work is not recognised* [emphasis in original source]. The transfer of command and control of Twenty-Seventh Army to 2nd Ukrainian Front may delay the course of the operation.'
>
> In an irritated tone, Stalin said, 'Fine. Let Vatutin personally control Thirteenth and Sixieth Armies in the Rivne-Lutsk-Dubno area, and you take responsibility for preventing the enemy from breaking through in the Lysyanka area.'[5]

This effectively removed Vatutin from command of the forces operating on the northern side of the pocket, limiting 1st Ukrainian Front's direct control to the armies further to the northwest. Orders from *Stavka* confirming the changed arrangements arrived shortly after.

The new arrangement was a considerable snub to Vatutin. He was frequently blamed for over-optimism and the success of Manstein's counteroffensive of March 1943 was widely regarded as being due to his failure to recognise that the Germans were far from beaten; it seems that he was a convenient scapegoat for others, including both Zhukov and Stalin, who also showed little insight into what was happening in early 1943 and constantly urged their subordinates to exploit to the full the consequences of the Stalingrad encirclement. Vatutin now contacted Zhukov to demand an explanation:

> I couldn't tell Vatutin who had proposed the changes, as I wished to avoid a clash between him and Konev. However, I believed in this case that Vatutin was correct that his troops deserved the credit for their achievements. 'Nikolai Fedorovich, this is an order from the supreme commander, we are just soldiers, and we have to obey it unconditionally.'
>
> Vatutin replied, 'Yes, the order will be executed.'[6]

The truth of the matter is impossible to determine. Konev appears to have been very selective in his account, trying to take credit for the redeployments that took place immediately before Stemmermann's breakout attempt but suggesting that the new command arrangements were at Stalin's instigation. Nor is it clear who had informed Stalin that the Germans were attempting to escape. Konev may have had doubts about taking command of forces on the far side of the pocket, but the new arrangement greatly increased his personal prestige and Zhukov's account, stating that this arrangement originated with Konev, sounds plausible. Stalin had long encouraged his subordinates to show ambition and to behave competitively. It was inevitable that sooner or later, this policy would result in a serious clash.

Within the pocket, *SS-Wallonien* joined 72nd Infantry Division, providing welcome reinforcements; despite being in almost constant combat for several days, the SS brigade still had several hundred men and ten assault guns and self-propelled anti-tank guns. Late on 12 February, Kästner's regiment probed forward towards Komarovka and launched a two-pronged attack on the town in darkness, catching the Soviet defenders by surprise. Fighting continued throughout the night and beyond dawn on 13 February, but by mid-morning Komarovka was firmly in German hands. The encircled troops had accomplished a great deal – certainly far more than the Soviet leadership had expected – and it seemed that a successful breakout was close. However, the Red Army was recovering its balance. Perhaps stung by Stalin's angry words, Zhukov ordered several tank, mechanised and infantry corps to concentrate on the German forces from III Panzer Corps that had seized the southern half of Lysyanka. The movement of these units was largely detected by the Germans through a mixture of radio intercepts and reconnaissance flights, but Hube and Wenck knew that there was no time for a prolonged defensive battle. Unless III Panzer Corps reached *Gruppe Stemmermann* soon, it would be too late.

Accordingly, *Wanda* was altered slightly to reflect the manner in which the operation was unfolding. In order to take advantage of the success of 1st Panzer Division, 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions were ordered to push forward to the north of Lysyanka in order to block any Soviet counterattack from that direction, while 1st Panzer Division was to cross the Gniloy Tikysh and attempt to reach Zhurzhintsy, which would put it almost within touching distance of the encirclement. On 13 February, as the temperature rose once more and the roads rapidly deteriorated, the advance was renewed. The firepower of Bäke's tanks, now attached to 16th Panzer Division, was put to good use in a series of encounters with Soviet tanks that were attempting to advance in the opposite direction. Near Dashukovka, the Red Army had set up a defensive line of anti-tank guns, assault guns and tanks; Bäke smashed it with almost contemptuous ease and 16th Panzer Division's panzergrenadiers rapidly secured the small town. From here, Bäke pushed on to Khizhintsy, but he had been forced to leave the panzergrenadiers behind to secure the area he had taken and, without infantry, he was unable to risk penetrating into the village. As darkness fell, the Soviet V Guards Tank Corps counterattacked. Bäke fell back a short distance to a better defensive line. His tanks were just six miles (10km) from Stemmermann's troops.

In Lysyanka, 1st Panzer Division fought off Soviet attacks from the southeast while attempting to find a crossing point over the Gniloy Tikysh. After a patrol discovered a possible ford near the destroyed bridge, the division's *Kampfgruppe Frank* attacked; despite confusion about a supporting Stuka attack, the force attempted to seize a bridgehead across the river:

> The leading platoon concentrated and moved into position under the cover of the houses on the west bank and suddenly opened fire on the known enemy strongpoints on the other bank. Under this covering fire, Oberfeldwebel Strippel drove into the river, which was 20–30m wide.
>
> The water rose above the tracks. Despite this, Gefreiter Nennstiel, the veteran driver of the platoon commander's tank, succeeded in reaching the other bank safely. A well-camouflaged T-34 suddenly opened fire but missed. Aware of the danger, Nennstiel turned his Panther to the left and Strippel's gunner took aim and fired, and the T-34 went up in flames. Feldwebel Hofmeister was the next to drive his Panther across and joined his platoon commander. Then came the radio message: 'Don't advance further – a Stuka strike is imminent!' The two Panthers on the east bank sought out whatever cover they could find. After about 5–8 minutes there was a new order: 'The Stukas aren't coming. Press on!' The rest of the Panthers of *Gruppe Frank* now crossed the river.[7]

Panzergrenadiers waded through the icy water to join the tanks while combat engineers set to work on the half-demolished bridge. Fending off repeated Soviet attacks by infantry and tanks, Frank turned north and assaulted the remaining parts of Lysyanka that were still in enemy hands, and cleared the town shortly before midnight. Three Panther tanks were lost in the fighting, but perhaps more serious were the casualties amongst the panzergrenadiers.

Heavy pressure continued on the flanks of III Panzer Corps. In an attempt to improve the problems faced by supply columns, the troops of *LSSAH* had shown considerable imagination and improvisation when they came across a store of rails in a brickyard; these were used to build a short narrow-gauge railway, along which supplies could be pulled in horse-drawn wagons. Motorised elements of the German Army were often given the abbreviation 'Mot.' and *LSSAH* labelled its new railway with the abbreviation 'Hot.' – a play on the word *Hottenhüh*, a childhood word for horse.[8] Despite the supplies that were brought forward, *LSSAH* had a particularly difficult day on 13 February but succeeded in holding its positions. The division's panzergrenadier regiments had lost up to 90 per cent of their troops in the weeks since their return to the Eastern Front; now, the division could field just 13 tanks and assault guns. Despite the weakness of the German forces and the determined attacks of the Red Army, both flanks held firm. With just a short distance to go, it seemed that one more attack would be able to break through to *Gruppe Stemmermann*, and all the German officers involved, from Manstein downwards, urged their men to make this last effort. As temperatures suddenly plunged and the ground began to harden, both sides remained determined to prevail. Bäke attacked Khizhintsy on 14 February and rapidly secured the village, beating off further Soviet counterattacks. Breith, accompanied by Generalmajor Hans-Ulrich Back, commander of 16th Panzer Division, flew to meet Bäke to discuss the next step. Bäke wished to press on towards the pocket, but Breith informed him that 16th Panzer Division was under increasingly heavy attack to the northwest. In addition, radio intercepts suggested that the Soviet XX Tank Corps – with about 80 tanks – was in position between Bäke's regiment and 1st Panzer Division in Lysyanka, and could threaten the flanks of any attempt by either German formation to advance. This Soviet force needed to be eliminated before any further push towards *Gruppe Stemmermann* could be attempted.

When they first appeared on the Eastern Front, Germany's Tiger tanks caused considerable consternation amongst the ranks of the Red Army and every effort was made to improve the ability of Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns to engage them effectively. Dmitri Fedorovich Loza, who had advanced to Zvenigorodka as part of Vatutin's thrust from the north in the initial encirclement, later described how he and his comrades tried to defeat the German heavyweights with their Sherman tanks, and also gives an indication of how the number of tank kills was often inflated:

> [The Tiger was] a heavy vehicle. The Sherman couldn't do anything against the Tiger's frontal armour, and we needed to get them to expose their sides. If we were defending, and the Germans attacked, we devised a plan. Two Shermans were assigned to deal with a single Tiger. The first Sherman tried to hit its track and to break it. The heavy tank drove on with one track, meaning that it began to turn. At that moment the second Sherman hit his side armour, trying to aim for the fuel tanks. The result was one German tank destroyed by two of ours, so both crews recorded a kill.[9]

In Lysyanka, the soldiers of 1st Panzer Division beat off further Soviet attempts to reduce the bridgehead that they had secured across the Gniloy Tikysh. The damaged bridge could not be repaired without the aid of the division's heavy bridging company, still stranded on muddy roads near Uman, but an attack to capture the last parts of Lysyanka that were still in Soviet hands made an unexpected discovery: there was another bridge across the river, capable of taking vehicles of up to 40 tons. The bridge was captured, but repeated waves of Soviet soldiers assailed 1st Panzer Division as elements of Second Tank Army, Fifth Guards Tank Army, and whatever other units Zhukov could scrape together were thrown forward in increasingly desperate attacks. Even if III Panzer Corps could bring forward supplies, even if Bäke could deal with XX Tank Corps, it would take at least one or two days before a further advance could be attempted. Everyone was aware that despite its successful attack towards the advancing German tanks, *Gruppe Stemmermann* was running out of ammunition and supplies – whether it could hold on for a couple of days was questionable.

Despite the weather, the Luftwaffe stretched every sinew to fly as much ammunition and fuel as possible to the encircled troops. However, the requirements for XI and XLII Corps to concentrate in the southwest of the pocket meant that the precious airfield at Korsun would have to be abandoned on 13 February. By this stage, the shell-cratered airfield was under sporadic Soviet artillery fire and most of the supplies brought by air were dropped by parachute, but a few planes continued to land and take off with wounded men until the last moment. Perhaps 2,000 seriously wounded men remained in the pocket, and attempts were made to move them southwest in the hope that III Panzer Corps would be able to break through and evacuate them to safety.

Generally, pressure upon the northern and eastern parts of the pocket was not intense during these days. It is likely that local Soviet commanders expected the imminent surrender of the Germans and saw no point in wasting the lives of their men, and the concentration of attention by both sides on the area between the encirclement and the German forces to the south and west resulted in only limited supplies reaching the Soviet troops on the eastern and northern parts of the perimeter. But whilst these sectors remained quiet, Konev threw forces at the ground that *Gruppe Stemmermann* had captured as it tried to move towards III Panzer Corps. *SS-Wallonien* had taken over the defence of Novo Buda and the village came under heavy attack by tanks and infantry from V Guards Cavalry Corps on 13 February. The Walloons were routed, but a determined counterattack by a regiment from 72nd Infantry Division drove the Soviet forces back. *SS-Wallonien* had started the day with about 1,000 men, but about 200 had been killed or wounded; the survivors now returned to Novo Buda, where they endured Soviet shelling for the rest of the day and the following night. On 14 February the Soviet attacks resumed, but the Walloons, supported by three German tanks, put up much stronger resistance than before, destroying several T-34s and stubbornly holding onto their positions. Konev repeatedly urged Selivanov to show more energy in the attacks, but the units of V Guards Cavalry Corps were almost as badly degraded as the German units they were fighting, and the well-intentioned redeployment of a cavalry division to form a reserve force actually weakened the resources available for an immediate counterattack. The transfer of a tank brigade from Fifth Guards Tank Army provided welcome reinforcements and a renewed attack was made on 15 February and overran the southern half of Novo Buda, but the Walloons managed to cling to the northern part. Nearby, there was bitter fighting in Komarovka where a mixed force from a Soviet cavalry division and three rifle divisions, supported by about 19 tanks, made repeated attacks on 14 and 15 September; the intervention of the last tanks of *SS-Wiking* allowed the Germans to retain control of the ruins. A little to the north, the soldiers of Lieb's XLII Corps made one last attempt to capture Petrovskoye, which had been recaptured by the Red Army in the initial phase of the German breakout towards III Panzer Corps; this latest attempt failed with heavy losses. Khilki, to the north of Komarovka, fell when it came under heavy attack by the Red Army, with most of the village being abandoned by the Germans during the afternoon of 15 February. Aware that Khilki lay astride the shortest route to III Panzer Corps in the west, Oberst Hermann Hohn, commander of 72nd Infantry Division, ordered Kästner to retake the village, and in a surprise attack before dawn on 16 February the Germans recaptured the ruins. There was bitter fighting the following day as Soviet units tried to retake the village, but for the moment Kästner and his remaining men – he had perhaps half the men with whom he had set out in the breakout attempt just five days earlier – managed to hold on.

Early on 15 February, Manstein assessed the overall situation. It was becoming clear that Breith's III Panzer Corps would be unable to fight its way through to the encirclement. Even if supplies could reach the attacking divisions, the Gniloy Tikysh – and the lack of bridges – continued to hinder any attempt to concentrate sufficient strength to renew the advance. There were simply far too many Soviet units in the area, and there was a substantial threat to the flanks of the panzer divisions. Even if they could make progress, they might find that they too were then cut off, and it was already proving almost impossible to get sufficient supplies to them to allow them to fend off Zhukov's attacks, let alone make further progress. The Gniloy Tikysh ran from the west, through Lysyanka, and then angled to the southeast; beyond the river, the terrain rose to the summit of Hill 239. Beyond the hill, there was relatively open ground towards Komarovka and the encirclement, and without control of Hill 239, any further advance by III Panzer Corps was almost impossible.

Within the pocket, the small town of Shanderovka, repeatedly hit by Soviet air attacks, was now home to a large number of non-combatant units – a mixture of supply formations, auxiliaries, railway workers, civilians, and even a small group of entertainers who had been caught in the encirclement, and together with the combat units in the surrounding villages, this compressed group was steadily haemorrhaging away under constant attack. After discussing matters with Wöhler, Manstein made a decision. *Gruppe Stemmermann* would have to fight its way out to the west, aiming to meet III Panzer Corps at Hill 239. Critically, the orders did not make clear that the vital hill was currently in Soviet hands, and Stemmermann and his subordinates began preparations in the belief that they just had to reach the hill, where their rescuers would be waiting.

It was normal practice for the Wehrmacht to allow local commanders considerable leeway in how they used the assets at their disposal, a mode of practice that was a large component of *Auftragstaktik*, or 'mission-based tactics'. The successes of the Wehrmacht were as much due to this flexibility as they were to innovative use of tanks in panzer formations. But on this occasion, Manstein issued detailed instructions about how the breakout was to be conducted, and Wöhler added his own details, stressing how Stemmermann was to use his remaining artillery and how he should comb out the personnel gathered in Shanderovka to get as many men into front-line units as possible. This latter step had of course already been taken, and Stemmermann protested that the instructions he was receiving were frequently unrealistic. It isn't entirely clear why both Manstein and Wöhler departed from normal practice on this occasion. Both men had expressed concerns about Stemmermann's temperament – the commander of the pocket had often appeared careworn and pessimistic, whereas Lieb had shown more confidence – and there was also considerable pressure from *OKH*, though to date this had not been as intrusive as had often been the case in the past. Another likely factor for Manstein was that he had not ordered Paulus to break out of the Stalingrad encirclement when the relief attempt stalled, and had waited instead for Hitler to authorise such a move. He had no intention of doing so on this occasion, and was determined to get the encircled men to safety.

On the other side of the front line, there was a similar level of determination. Zhukov and Konev were aware that Stalin's attention was on them, and they intended to honour their promises to the supreme commander that not a single

German would escape. The advances made by III Panzer Corps, together with Stemmermann's attacks towards the southwest, left both Soviet commanders in no doubt about precisely where the battle would be decided, and like Manstein, Wöhler and Hube, they too urged their subordinates to make one more effort. They too could see that control of Hill 239 would be of critical importance in determining the final outcome.

In Lysyanka, 1st Panzer Division's engineers managed to strengthen the northern bridge captured late on 14 February, but it was not strong enough to take the weight of Bäke's Tiger tanks, which were sent the following morning to support a renewed thrust towards Hill 239 from the northwest. As the Tigers set off on a long detour, elements of 1st Panzer Division on the far side of the river came under fire from Soviet tanks and, to their surprise and dismay, the Germans lost several Panthers to long-range fire. Until now, Soviet tanks had been forced to engage the Germans at close range, but this battle saw the appearance of a new Soviet weapon. Elements of XX Tank Corps had received the new JS-2 tank, armed with its immense 122mm gun. These tanks could carry only a relatively small number of shells and had a slow rate of fire, but they were – from a German point of view – depressingly effective. Without waiting for the Tigers, the Germans attempted to attack and drive off the Soviet forces. They made only limited progress. Conversely, repeated Soviet attempts to recapture the bridges in Lysyanka were beaten off, though Soviet air attacks succeeded in damaging the northern crossing.

Some of the battalions of XX Tank Corps still had the older JS-1, armed with the 85mm gun that had originally been intended as an answer to the Tiger's 88mm weapon. Boris Petrovich Zakharov was manning one of these tanks, and his recollections show that, at a tactical level, the Red Army still had much to learn:

> At first we were in defensive positions near the village of Zhurzhintsy, and at dawn on 15 February we were moved to positions near the village of Lysyanka. On redeployment, my tank ran over a mine. The explosion blew off a return roller and jammed the gearbox. However, the vehicle remained in working order and we managed to pull the track free and move the vehicle to the designated area. Another tank in my platoon had a leaking gearbox – the gearboxes of the JS-1 were very fragile and often failed. Thus, only one combat-ready tank was left in the platoon, and just three in the entire company. The regiment, and with it our company, was on a thinly wooded hill before Lysyanka [Hill 239]. The outskirts of the village, just 500m away, were clearly visible, as was the embankment of a

> narrow gauge railway … The regiment commander, having received orders to attack Lysyanka, decided to use the first company, which had five serviceable tanks. Captain Gmiryansky was their commander. I watched the attack and it left a deep impression on me. Based on my combat experience, I thought the regiment commander's plan was poor. Having moved up in a line, the five tanks went ahead and when they began to climb the railway embankment, the German anti-aircraft guns deployed on the outskirts of Lysyanka destroyed them literally in a few seconds. Some tanks got bogged down in the snow, others caught fire. The entire company was wiped out.[10]

Zakharov's assessment appears to have been accurate. Many years after the war, he and other veterans returned to the battlefield and found a line of approach that could have permitted the Soviet tanks to advance under cover; better reconnaissance would perhaps have altered the course of the battle, but in the heat of the fighting, officers on both sides were under intense pressure to make rapid decisions, and neither side was immune from such errors.

Late on 15 January, a reinforced company of 1st Panzer Division's panzergrenadiers, supported by four Panther tanks, cleared the few houses on the outskirts of Lysyanka that were still held by Soviet troops. For the moment, the German position was secure.

In an attempt to sustain the attack towards the encirclement, Breith had pulled *LSSAH* out of its positions on the northern flank of the advance in order to use what remained of the SS division in the main thrust. It is a measure of the weakness of the unit that one of its battlegroups had been reduced to just 131 officers and men; its commander, Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Sandig, was worried about the health of his men and ordered an inspection, as a result of which a further 44 men were deemed to be unfit for combat. The rest of the group, in barely better shape than the men who had been sent to the rear, was ordered to Lysyanka where they were to join 1st Panzer Division and attack to capture Hill 239.[11] At the same time, Bäke's heavy tanks would make another effort to push forward from the northwest, and *Gruppe Stemmermann* would commence its breakout. Fuel supplies continued to hamper operations, not least because the Luftwaffe units attempting to fly fuel to the front line were hamstrung by a shortage both of parachutes and jerry cans. The aircrews had to resort to flying as low and as slowly as they could and throwing barrels of fuel from the transport planes. Many of these burst on impact with the ground, and the barrels that survived had to be decanted into smaller containers before the precious fuel could be poured into the tanks. Nevertheless, sufficient fuel and ammunition managed to reach the German spearheads to support this last, determined effort to rescue the encircled troops. Everyone knew that it was now or never: if this attempt to link up with *Gruppe Stemmermann* failed, there would be no hope of escape and the Red Army would have achieved its second Stalingrad.

Under almost continuous artillery fire, the German units in Lysyanka made their preparations on the morning of 16 February. The Red Army was clearly aware of the importance of the coming fighting and a group of 20 T-34s with supporting infantry attacked the eastern side of Lysyanka shortly after dawn, pushing forward from the summit of Hill 239. The attack was repulsed, but a German counterattack towards the village of Oktyabr, between Lysyanka and Hill 239, was also brought to a halt by heavy defensive fire. Almost immediately, another Soviet attack against Lysyanka appeared from the southeast; for the loss of a single Panther, a group of seven German tanks managed to beat off about 30 Soviet tanks, claiming the destruction of 27 T-34s.[12]

Both Breith and Koll visited Lysyanka during the morning. Breith informed the commander of 1st Panzer Division that 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions held the line to the north but both – particularly the latter – were under heavy enemy attack, with powerful Soviet forces identified as parts of XVI Tank Corps attempting to drive in the northern flank of the German position. Breith told Koll that, supported by elements of Bäke's regiment, 1st Panzer Division 'had to reach the encirclement from the outside, regardless of circumstances'.[13] The pressure on all commanders was intense, and despite its losses and the absence of so many of its rear area units, still stranded on the wrecked roads stretching back to Uman, 1st Panzer Division remained the last, best hope for *Gruppe Stemmermann*. Even though the temperature had once more dropped below zero, this created its own problems; several of 1st Panzer Division's tanks had been bogged down the previous day when the ground was still soft, and when they attempted to extract themselves from the rapidly freezing mud, three Pz.IVs suffered immobilising damage to their drive sprockets. Lacking the means to recover the tanks so that they could be repaired, the crews had no alternative but to place demolition charges in them so that they could be destroyed if Soviet forces threatened to overrun them.

It was vital for the Germans to capture Oktyabr without further delay and Hauptmann Gerhard Cramer led an attack with four tanks on the village supported by perhaps 100 panzergrenadiers. The Soviet defenders drove the German infantry to seek cover in a narrow ravine, and three of the attacking Panthers became stranded in deep snow. However, a thrust by 1st Panzer Division's *Kampfgruppe Frank* advanced from Lysyanka into the area immediately east of Oktyabr at the same moment that Bäke's remaining Tigers approached the Soviet-held village from the northwest. In bitter, costly fighting, the Germans pressed home their attack, and by early afternoon Oktyabr had been captured. The three Panthers that had been left stuck in the snow were able to extricate themselves and joined the forces in Oktyabr just in time to beat off a Soviet counterattack. A solitary Panther moved forward to a crossroads to the east of Oktyabr, immediately north of the vital Hill 239. Further reinforcements followed, but were brought under fire by Soviet troops; Cramer was killed and two senior NCOs badly wounded, and despite its success, 1st Panzer Division lacked the strength to eliminate Soviet units that constantly brought the road east of Oktyabr under fire. A particularly troublesome group in dense woodland immediately east of the village fought off several German attacks and was only silenced when a Stuka strike was called in.

Bäke's regiment had only nine Tiger tanks still running and these now moved forward towards Hill 239. From here, the village of Zhurzhintsy to the north was clearly visible, but before the Germans could advance further, Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns opened fire at close range. A fierce firefight erupted with the Tigers coming under fire from both Zhurzhintsy and Pochapintsy and a Tiger was set ablaze. Despite destroying several Soviet tanks, the Germans decided that they could not hold their positions on the hilltop and withdrew to the southwest where the rest of *Kampfgruppe Frank* had gathered. The battlegroup commander was wounded and taken to the rear, and Bäke took command of the various units gathered to the west of Hill 239. The short day was drawing to a close, and plans were made for a renewed operation the following day: the recently arrived units of *LSSAH* would attack Soviet positions to the south of the vital hill while Bäke stormed the hill itself. The panzer crews were unaware that just a short distance away, the personnel of *Gruppe Stemmermann* were about to set out in the expectation that the hilltop was held by III Panzer Corps.

Wenck, Hube's chief of staff, visited the battlefield using a *Kettenkrad* (a unique German vehicle consisting of a motorcycle with the rear wheel replaced by tracks). Reluctantly, he concluded that III Panzer Corps had achieved as much as it could. The tank strength of every unit had fallen away dramatically and the soldiers were exhausted by constant fighting and their struggles against the weather. The difficulties experienced in moving supplies forward were so great that some men had not received food for several days and had used up their stocks of emergency rations. It might be possible for 1st Panzer Division and Bäke's regiment to recapture Hill 239, but a link-up with the encirclement would require Stemmermann's men to cover the remaining distance.

To the south of the encirclement, Wöhler continued to criticise Vormann and urged him to renew his attacks. Vormann knew that his weakened divisions were in no state to make such attacks, and was already looking to the future – it was inevitable that the Red Army would attack his units once the fighting around the pocket was over, and he regarded his priority as ensuring that his thinly held line was not overwhelmed in such an attack. On 15 February – the day that 1st Panzer Division fought for control of Lysyanka – Vormann directed his units to try to attack towards First Panzer Army in order to establish firm contact; there remained a gap between the left flank of Eighth Army and the right flank of First Panzer Army. Relations between Wöhler and Vormann had been deteriorating throughout the battle and now reached a new low. Speidel, Wöhler's chief of staff, demanded that Vormann break off his attempts to link up with First Panzer Army and instead attack towards Zvenigorodka. Stung by repeated criticism of the manner in which he had led his panzer corps, the exasperated Vormann ensured that he was unavailable to speak to Eighth Army headquarters for much of the day; his staff informed Wöhler and Speidel that Vormann was overseeing the attack personally.

Wöhler clearly felt under huge pressure to reach the encirclement, but his assessment of the strength of XLVII Panzer Corps was unrealistic. In keeping with Eighth Army's instructions, the exhausted 11th and 13th Panzer Divisions attacked towards the north on the morning of 16 February, at the same time as 1st Panzer Division's attack on Oktyabr, but made very little progress. A furious Wöhler – who was himself under pressure from Army Group South headquarters to continue his attacks – travelled to the front line, where he met Vormann and the commanders of 11th and 13th Panzer Divisions, Wietersheim and Mikosch. The former was recovering from a severe viral infection and was clearly unwell, and Wöhler assessed the latter as a steady commander, but perhaps more suited to a sustained operation rather than the short, intensive effort that was currently required. In the war diary of Eighth Army, Wöhler recorded a damning assessment of Vormann:

> [Vormann is] clearly greatly affected by the cold weather and nervous strain. I do not believe that he is a leader in whom the troops have confidence. He lacks the energy and self-confidence and … any sense of optimism … Whenever he redrafts his plans, he sees insurmountable difficulties.[14]

This criticism was inaccurate and unreasonable. Vormann's divisions were at the end of their strength, and whereas Breith had been given the task of reaching the pocket while VII Corps protected the line to the northwest, Vormann had been left to deal with a front line of about 90 miles (150km) while trying to advance with burned-out divisions. Even though he saw for the first time the reality on the ground and commented on the almost impossible conditions in which the supply units struggled to bring forward food, fuel and ammunition, Wöhler was critical of Vormann for the poor physical state of the men in the front line. It is certainly arguable that this constant criticism of a subordinate was an attempt by the army commander to ensure that, if the battle ended badly, he would not personally be blamed, and it should be remembered that officers at every level – on both sides of the front line – felt under tremendous pressure to achieve success. Regardless of the reasons, Wöhler's constant harassment of Vormann resulted in a permanent rift between the two men. After his (arguably belated) trip to the front line, Wöhler had to face reality and ordered XLVII Panzer Corps to hold its positions and to try to tie down as many enemy units as possible instead of making further attempts to attack to the north, precisely as Vormann had intended to do. Despite knowing that they had done their best in almost impossible circumstances, the emotions of the men of Vormann's panzer divisions – all of whom knew what was at stake – can easily be imagined when they realised that they would be unable to break through to their isolated comrades.

The pocket held by *Gruppe Stemmerman* had continued to contract and by 15 February it was perhaps three miles wide and five miles deep, centred on the town of Shanderovka. In this tight space, about 49,000 men waited for rescue, under regular bombardment by Soviet artillery and aircraft. Throughout 16 February, Stemmermann waited for news of the progress of III Panzer Corps; his line of communication ran via the headquarters of Eighth Army rather than to First Panzer Army, so he received information indirectly after some delay – Breith reported to First Panzer Army headquarters in Uman, from where the news was passed both to Army Group South and Eighth Army, and then from the latter to Stemmermann. Orders for a breakout to the west had been drawn up and distributed late the previous day. Lieb's XLII Corps would lead the operation, attacking towards the southwest in three columns. *Korps Abteilung B* formed the northern group, 72nd Infantry Division was in the centre, and the bulk of *SS-Wiking* made up the southern group. Stemmermann would command the rearguard, consisting of the remnants of 57th and 88th Infantry Divisions. The remaining tanks of *SS-Wiking* would be held in reserve and much of the medium and heavy artillery in the pocket was to be destroyed after firing off the last of its ammunition. It was expected that the soldiers would have to cover about six miles (10km) before they reached safety.

Perhaps the hardest decision for Stemmermann concerned several thousand badly wounded men who could not be moved. To attempt to take them with the troops breaking out was impossible – there wasn't sufficient transport, and if the troops attempted to take the wounded men with them, the breakout would be forced to proceed so slowly that it would have no chance of success. Despite knowing that the Red Army – like the Wehrmacht – had often executed wounded men rather than take them prisoner, Stemmermann decided that he had no choice but to leave the wounded behind with a small group of medical personnel. Despite this order, some units took matters into their own hands. The SS in particular knew that there was little prospect of their wounded surviving if they fell into Soviet hands, and over 200 men were loaded into tracked vehicles and small horse-drawn carts.

Lieb clearly did not expect things to go well. When he briefed his subordinates, he advised them that he anticipated that everything would become very confused and that it was important that they kept their heads. The attack would be led by men concentrated on a narrow front of just a little over a mile, and in an attempt to achieve surprise, there would be no preparatory bombardment. Instead, the attack would be delivered at bayonet-point: men in the first line were ordered to unload their weapons so that an accidental shot couldn't alert the Soviet troops. When he briefed the officers of *SS-Wiking*, Gille was terse, as Degrelle, the commander of *SS-Wallonien*, later recalled:

> [Gille said] only a desperate effort can save us now. Waiting is pointless. Tomorrow morning, the 50,000 men in the pocket must charge towards the southwest. We must either break through or die … Gille took pains not to describe the situation too realistically. It all seemed as if all we had to do was cross a zone of 5.5km to reach the liberating army.[15]

Right to the end, Hitler continued to procrastinate and did not issue an order for a breakout. Fearing that any order would come too late, Manstein took matters into his own hands. On 16 February, he ordered Stemmermann to proceed as planned. In any event, given the manner in which the pocket had contracted, there was no choice as it would surely be destroyed unless a breakout was successful. Even if Hitler were to order the pocket to continue to hold, it was too late.

While the Germans were making their last plans, Konev too redeployed his forces. He was aware of the pressure from Stalin for the promised destruction of the pocket to be achieved and he planned a final assault for 17 February.

XVIII Tank Corps was to attack from the northwest while Fourth Guards Army attacked from the southeast and V Guards Cavalry Corps attacked from the west. This final part of the attack would require the tired men and horses of Selivanov's divisions to make a substantial redeployment, and Selivanov informed an impatient Konev that he could not be in position before the evening of 17 February. The plan for the assault was that the cavalry would mop up the remnants of the pocket after XVIII Tank Corps and Fourth Army had broken it up, so this delay was – barely – acceptable. In the meantime, pressure on the perimeter of the pocket remained constant, with repeated attacks on all sides. These attacks concentrated mainly on the sector from where *Gruppe Stemmermann* would break out; one such attack captured the village of Komarovka, but despite this village being the intended starting point for the attack by *SS-Wiking*, there was only a small adjustment in the German plan. Even if more extensive changes were contemplated, there simply wasn't time.

At 2300 on 16 February, Lieb's troops began the attempt to reach III Panzer Corps. It seems that the Red Army was taken by surprise by the attack, perhaps because the Soviet forces had planned their own attack for the following morning and expected the imminent collapse of the pocket; after all, there had been bitter fighting during the day as III Panzer Corps tried in vain to move closer to the pocket, and throughout this fighting the encircled Germans had made no attempt to head west. The exhausted soldiers of Trofimenko's Twenty-Seventh Army were startled when the Germans appeared almost silently out of the darkness, with a strong easterly wind blowing snow into the faces of the defenders. The first line of Soviet positions was rapidly overrun and the German battalion on the right flank of *Korps Abteilung B* – the northern flank of the breakout attempt – moved forward swiftly. The Germans skirted the southern edge of Zhurzhintsy and continued towards the southwest. They soon encountered another line of Soviet defences, this time facing west – part of the Soviet line facing III Panzer Corps. The Soviet troops were rapidly overwhelmed and the German battalion continued on its way, reaching Oktyabr at about 0400 on 17 February. Here, they met a Tiger tank from Bäke's regiment. In keeping with their orders, the Germans had made the entire march, including their attacks on the Soviet lines, without firing a shot. The Tiger company commander later described the moment:

> Those in front still carried machine-guns or rifles; then came those who were without weapons. Some limped along or were supported by comrades, or had some sort of a walking stick as a support. They all looked bedraggled, yet they

> moved with a firm and steady sense of purpose … [They] must have had many terrible trials behind them by the time they encountered us. A few of them cried from exhaustion. I had begun to cry as well.[16]

It was an encouraging start to the breakout. A second battalion was following closely behind and it too reached Oktyabr, reporting that it had passed Soviet sentries who silently watched the Germans march past, perhaps mistaking them for a column of Soviet soldiers. To their surprise and dismay, the commanders of the escapees – a total of perhaps 300 men – were ordered to take up positions to defend Oktyabr alongside the badly depleted panzergrenadier companies of 1st Panzer Division, but this order was ignored and the men continued on their way to the southwest until they reached Lysyanka. As it began to grow light on 17 February, a Soviet attack on Oktyabr by 41st Guards Rifle Division overwhelmed the German defences and captured much of the village; furious that his orders for the men from the encirclement to defend the village had been ignored, Bäke scraped together all the personnel he could find, including his headquarters staff, and mounted a counterattack to drive the Soviet forces back.

The central column of the German breakout was led by 72nd Infantry Division. Again, the first line of Soviet defences was overwhelmed in a near-silent attack. In the darkness, the leading regiment, led by Oberstleutnant Kästner, lost its way and moved northwest instead of southwest. The Germans reached the outskirts of Zhurzhintsy and a reconnaissance group found that there were Soviet troops, supported by tanks, deployed south of the village along the road running to Hill 239. The leading elements of Kästner's regiment managed to cross the road, even stopping a Soviet truck column, which waited patiently for the infantry to trudge past, assuming that they were Soviet soldiers. To the west of the road, the Germans encountered the Soviet troops facing 1st Panzer Division and rapidly overwhelmed them, but not before the alarm was raised. Kästner and his remaining men pushed on into the darkness until they reached German lines near Lysyanka. They had broken out, but the Red Army was now becoming aware of what was happening.

The third German column, on the southern flank of the breakout, was led by the reconnaissance battalion of *SS-Wiking*. The Germans ran into a Soviet defensive line to the southwest of Petrovskoye and managed to fight their way through, but they reached the road from Zhurzhintsy to Hill 239 just as the Soviet defenders were alerted by Kästner's attack a little to the north. Under heavy fire, the SS troops pulled back to the northeast to regroup, and then launched an attack to try to capture Hill 239. The men of *Gruppe Stemmermann* had expected the hill to be in German hands, and news of the withdrawal of Bäke's tanks from the hilltop the previous afternoon had not been passed to the pocket. Further columns of Germans attempting to escape the encirclement now began to arrive and Untersturmführer Heinrich Debus, the commander of the SS reconnaissance battalion, issued orders for his men to edge further south before trying again to break through to safety. The columns behind the reconnaissance battalion followed; Soviet artillery began to fire on them, at first shelling the area in a haphazard manner, but later with increasing force and accuracy.

Tanks from the Soviet XVIII Tank Corps were now beginning to reinforce the line along the road from Zhurzhintsy to Hill 239 and the German units in the central column who were following Kästner found it impossible to emulate his regiment's escape. They too turned south, where the leading German elements continued to try to find a way to safety. Dawn was not far off, and having skirted the eastern and southern edges of Hill 239, the Germans surprised and overwhelmed Soviet positions facing west. However, as they continued towards the west, they encountered the Gniloy Tikysh, which now lay between them and Lysyanka. Order began to break down with officers becoming separated from their men, and as the sky began to lighten, Soviet commanders began to gather sufficient information to give them a clearer picture of events. Although small groups of Germans continued to slip past Zhurzhintsy and managed to reach Oktyabr, most of *Gruppe Stemmermann* was forced to the south. It was here that the fate of the breakout would be decided.

Shortly after 0800, the first clear information about the breakout attempt reached the headquarters of the Soviet V Guards Tank Corps. About half an hour later, Major General Vasily Mikhailovich Alekseev, the corps commander, reported to Trofimenko's headquarters that a breakout was under way. There were confused reports about whether Hill 239 was still in Soviet hands, as Soviet units also became increasingly disordered. In order to prevent a breakout, Zhukov and Konev had crowded the area with all the units they could find, and this profusion of different units added to the confusion. As the morning progressed, elements of the Soviet 41st Rifle Division and tanks from XVIII, XX, and XXIX Tank Corps joined the defensive line from Zhurzhintsy through Hill 239 and towards Pochapintsy. At about 0900 Konev ordered all of the forces under his command – i.e. those surrounding the pocket – to attack immediately, with the intention of breaking up the pocket and overwhelming it rapidly. Unfortunately, many units – including V Guards Cavalry Corps – were still redeploying in accordance with the orders that Konev had issued the previous day in preparation for his planned attack on the encirclement. There was little control of the considerable artillery assets available to Konev's units, but by mid-morning groups of Soviet tanks began to break up the mass of German troops attempting to follow the spearheads that had led the breakout. The Germans later described how tanks machine-gunned and then crushed wagons that were clearly displaying red crosses and were packed with wounded – it seems that Stemmermann's instructions to leave the badly wounded in Shanderovka were ignored in many cases – but in the main, the Soviet tanks were not accompanied by infantry and determined groups of Germans were able to drive them off using *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapons at close range. But if the Soviet tank crewmen used their vehicles to crush German soldiers, there was plenty of evidence that – perhaps because they were desperate to escape as quickly as they could – the Germans too made little attempt to take prisoners. Evgeni Grigorevich Grigorev, a gunner in an anti-tank artillery brigade, described coming upon the aftermath of an earlier action in a cemetery:

> There was a girl, a senior lieutenant in the medical service, in our regiment – I don't remember her last name. She was found dead in the middle of the cemetery. The Nazis had taken her boots, stripped her, riddled her belly with a burst of automatic fire, and smashed her head with a rifle butt. Her brains were intermingled with her hair. In another place in the cemetery we found a heap of our officers, who had been killed by the Fascists. Their overcoats were shredded by bursts of machine-gun fire, some of their heads smashed by rifle butts. We found Captain Spirin, the secretary of the brigade's Communist Party Committee, with his head split open. A little further, in a ditch, was a line of NCOs, all of them shot.[17]

The Soviet troops, too, often showed little inclination on occasion to take prisoners, particularly if they were wounded, as rifleman Issa Borisovich Stratievskiy recalled:

> The battalion commander called me and said that according to our outposts, the Germans were infiltrating out of the encirclement. He ordered me to take some men and check it out. I took five men from my platoon, with two light machine-guns and three submachine-guns and our grenades, and went into the empty village at the end of the battalion's sector. We were covered by the crew of a Maxim machine-gun from a hillock behind and above us. A decrepit old man was in one of the huts, and we said to him, 'Grandfather, show us where the Germans

> are moving through at night.' We then lay in wait and heard footsteps in the darkness, and German and Romanian speech [Stratievskiy must have been mistaken, as there were no Romanian troops in the encirclement]. About 20m from us, across the road, a group of men from the encirclement, more than 30, had gathered. They stood and discussed the route they should take. And then we hit them with all barrels.
>
> We dropped them all and killed them, we didn't leave anyone. We collected documents and weapons from the corpses, finished off the wounded Germans, and returned to the battalion by morning.[18]

Having taken Komarovka the previous day, the Soviet forces repeatedly attempted to take Khilki, a little to the north; the German breakout was effectively channelled through the narrow gap between these two villages, a distance of only half a mile, and if Khilki could be captured, the Red Army would be able to prevent the escape of the German rearguard and any units still in Shanderovka. Despite repeated attacks by the Soviet 180th and 202nd Rifle Divisions, a small group of former German artillerymen resolutely held on to Khilki.

After helping to restore the defences at Novo Buda before the breakout, the *Germania* panzergrenadier regiment of *SS-Wiking*, together with the last of the division's tanks – a command vehicle, two Pz.IVs, four Pz.IIIs and six assault guns – had concentrated in Shanderovka. These men now received orders to proceed to the west, and almost immediately the column ran into trouble when the command tank broke through the small bridge in Shanderovka, leading to considerable delays. Escorted by the surviving crews of tanks that had been lost, Sturmbannführer Hans Köller led his men forward:

> At 0210 the battalion moved out … The last remaining wheeled vehicles of the battalion were blown up [near Khilki], since it was no longer possible for them to move any further … Enemy tanks moved out from Komarovka and attempted to prevent the breakthrough by means of heavy fire.
>
> Untersturmführer Schumacher was committed south of Khilki with all the available vehicles to eliminate the [enemy] tanks [that had] appeared there from Komarovka. Two tanks were eliminated. The command tank had to be blown up because of differential and track problems …
>
> The commander and adjutant attempted to hold together the men of the battalion, which was not possible due to the overall murky situation. The commander then mounted an 18-ton prime mover, since it was the only vehicle capable of moving forward in that terrain.

> Enemy tanks arrived, moving from north to south, and engaged the tanks advancing southwest … along with the other vehicles that had made it that far, with machine-guns and main guns. At the patch of woods east of Zhurzhintsy, where the prime mover had to cross an open area, it was engaged by enemy tanks. The prime mover received a direct hit right behind the driver's seat. The commander, Sturmbannführer Köller, met a soldier's end.
>
> Enemy tanks appeared once more at the western tip of the woods, approaching from Zhurzhintsy. The high ground at the tip of the woods could not be crossed by the tanks. As a result, they had to be blown up.
>
> The men of the battalion fought their way through individually. Towards evening, the majority of the battalion arrived in Lysyanka. The adjutant was wounded during the breakout attempt.[19]

Some of the tanks from *SS-Wiking* attempted in vain to climb the eastern slope of Hill 239 before they were abandoned.

Another occupant of the prime mover carrying Köller was Oberscharführer Fiebelkorn, who had been injured when his tank was knocked out near Novo Buda. He managed to escape the stricken vehicle and a comrade found a horse-drawn wagon for him. When they came under fire, the driver of the wagon abandoned it and disappeared; Fiebelkorn was pulled from the wagon by an officer just before it was destroyed by gunfire. For several hours, the wounded man lay by the side of the road, begging the passing soldiers to take him with them; finally, he encountered two other wounded men and they managed to move on towards the southwest. Early on 18 February, they found themselves in an area that was clearly held by Soviet troops and took cover, waiting until dark before setting forth once more. Both of Fiebelkorn's companions died during the next few hours, succumbing to their wounds and the cold, but Fiebelkorn finally managed to reach a German outpost. In addition to his original wounds, his feet and hands were frostbitten from the long crawl through the snow.[20]

The German troops who had gathered south of Hill 239 attempted to break through the Soviet lines in a mass attack late in the morning. Despite suffering heavy losses, the Germans – perhaps as many as 4,000 – pressed home their attack and managed to reach the Gniloy Tikysh. Several hundred men gathered here, including the survivors of the reconnaissance battalion of *SS-Wiking*, and Major Hans Siegel, an officer from 72nd Infantry Division, took command. He organised the men to deploy in an east-facing bridgehead while other soldiers were ordered to improvise a crossing. The bridgehead was steadily swelled by more German troops managing to reach it from the east, and sporadic Soviet attacks were beaten off. Attempts to build a bridge failed, and men began to swim across the icy river. When they reached the river, Lieb and Gille – the commander of *SS-Wiking* – tried to restore order, but every attempt to construct a breakwater with wagons and even a half-track failed. The only way to safety was to swim through the icy water and then march to Lysyanka. Even when they reached the small town, the Germans found themselves under shellfire and had to continue on foot, in their wet clothing, to Bushanka. To make matters worse for the Germans, radio communications between the headquarters of 1st Panzer Division and Bäke's regiment had been disrupted by radio failures and it was only when frozen men began to reach Lysyanka and Bushanka that the Germans realised that the entire breakout had angled to the south. When they became aware of what was happening, Bäke and Koll decided that they would attempt once more to recapture Hill 239 from the west and northwest, thus opening a route for the rest of *Gruppe Stemmermann* to reach the bridges over the Gniloy Tikysh in Lysyanka.

While Konev urged his units to crush *Gruppe Stemmermann*, Zhukov continued to concentrate his attention on III Panzer Corps. Despite several attacks, the German lines continued to hold; although many German tanks had been disabled during Breith's attack, they were still available to provide fire support and they inflicted heavy losses on the Soviet tanks that repeatedly surged forward. Meanwhile, Bäke's remaining tanks attacked Hill 239 late in the morning and captured the summit with surprising ease. An attempt to push on towards Pochapintsy was abandoned as more and more Soviet tanks and anti-tank guns appeared around the village and heavy Soviet artillery fire eventually forced the German tanks, which were now running out of ammunition, to withdraw from the vital hill back towards Oktyabr. Zhukov's tanks now attacked this vital village, and although the battered remnants of 1st Panzer Division were able to hold on, it was clear that, far from advancing to link up with *Gruppe Stemmermann*, the Germans in and around Lysyanka would struggle to hold their current positions.

After struggling to maintain order in the bridgehead on the shores of the Gniloy Tikysh, Lieb crossed the river in the late afternoon. When he reached Lysyanka, he took command of the intermingled units that had managed to reach the town. The soldiers of 1st Panzer Division had received inadequate supplies for their own needs in the past few days and had none to spare for the escapees, and Lieb dispatched the survivors of *Gruppe Stemmermann* down the road to Bushanka. Even here, they were under artillery fire and had to continue onwards to Uman. Gille too crossed the river as the first elements of the pocket's rearguard began to reach the area. After their rout earlier in the fighting, the Walloons had shown far more resilience in the days that followed, but they were now at the end of their strength. A group of about 2,500 Germans and Belgians gathered in a narrow gully near Hill 239 under the command of Generalmajor Kurt Kruse, the commander of 389th Infantry Division and Oberst Heinrich Horn, commander of 72nd Infantry Division. At sunset, this group fought its way through to the Gniloy Tikysh close to Lysyanka. Here, they found that a timber beam had been laid across the river and crossed to safety.

Most of the combat-worthy elements of *Gruppe Stemmermann* had now escaped. The mass of rear area personnel and stragglers who followed in their wake were less determined, and many surrendered en masse. Pursuit of the rearguard was delayed when Soviet soldiers came across piles of abandoned German equipment and possessions and took the opportunity to gather loot, and survivors continued to reach safety long into the night; by now, a couple of crossings over the Gniloy Tikysh had been improvised. Stemmermann was amongst those who did not escape. He apparently commandeered one of the last surviving vehicles of *SS-Wiking* and shortly after it had passed Khilki it was hit by an anti-tank round, and the pocket commander was killed by shrapnel.

Even as fighting continued – the Red Army tried repeatedly to break the defences of III Panzer Corps as well as pursuing the rearguard of *Gruppe Stemmermann* – Radio Moscow issued a communiqué:

> On 17 February, after 14 days of constant, bitter combat, the troops of 2nd Ukrainian Front completed an operation that resulted in the liquidation of ten divisions and a brigade of the German Eighth Army, which had been encircled in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky area. During the battle the Germans left 52,000 men dead on the field of battle. A further 11,000 officers and men surrendered. All of the enemy's equipment and weapons have been captured.[21]

Zhukov was critical of this announcement:

> As deputy commander-in-chief, by whom the troops of 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts were equally valued, I must say that Stalin was very wrong in this communiqué not to mention the troops of 1st Ukrainian Front, who alongside the soldiers of 2nd Ukrainian Front fought the enemy heroically wherever they were directed by the Front command and *Stavka* without concern for their lives. Regardless of who reported what to Stalin, he should have been objective in

> assessing the actions of both fronts. Why he permitted such an injustice remains unclear to me to this day. This superb operation was organised and executed by the troops of two Fronts. I think the supreme commander made an unforgiveable mistake.
>
> It is well known that the successful encirclement and destruction of the enemy grouping depended on the actions of both the internal and external Fronts. Both Fronts, led by Vatutin and Konev, fought equally well.[22]

Konev later wrote:

> We took all measures to ensure that none of the Nazis escaped the encirclement.
>
> It was impossible to penetrate four lines of defence – two on the internal [i.e. facing the pocket] and two on the external [i.e. facing III Panzer Corps] fronts, past our anti-tank defences and artillery …
>
> When dawn came [on 17 February] the Germans, seeing the hopelessness of their position, began to surrender in large groups. During the fighting I spoke several times with the commanders of 69th, 7th and 41st Rifle Divisions, which occupied positions along the Gniloy Tikysh bank on the outer face of the encirclement. They reported that not a single German soldier passed through their positions …
>
> General Gille apparently flew out by plane before the start of the battle, or escaped through the front line dressed in civilian clothes. I do not accept that he made his way through our positions in a tank or other vehicle …
>
> According to official data, the enemy lost 55,000 officers and men killed or wounded in the fighting, more than 18,000 prisoners, and a large quantity of military equipment and weapons. It should be added that this does not fully reflect enemy losses. Thus when trying to break through the encirclement from the outside, the Germans lost 20,000 officers and men killed and lost a lot of equipment, in particular 329 aircraft, over 600 tanks, and over 500 guns.[23]

Given that Stalin had insisted that the Germans were not to be permitted to escape, it is perhaps unsurprising that Konev and his subordinates tried to portray the battle as one in which *Gruppe Stemmermann* was annihilated. Indeed, it is possible that rather than report that German troops were escaping across the Gniloy Tikysh, local commanders did not pass this information to higher commands, aware of the wrath that would descend upon them. A more accurate estimate of German losses is that about 59,000 men had been trapped in the encirclement, and of these, about 36,000 managed to reach III Panzer Corps.

A further 4,000 – mainly wounded men – were flown out of the pocket, which means that total losses of killed and taken prisoner came to about 19,000, with a further 11,000 wounded.[24] In addition, First Panzer Army lost about 5,100 killed, wounded or missing, and Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps a further 5,000. Soviet losses totalled about 80,000 killed, wounded and missing. Armour losses are difficult to assess, as vehicles were often repaired and returned to service only to be knocked out again, and others were lost – temporarily or permanently – to breakdowns or when they became stuck in the difficult terrain, but estimates range from 600 to 850 Soviet tanks and assault guns, and 300 German tanks and assault guns.[25]

There were awards on the Soviet side to recognise the victory. Rotmistrov was promoted to marshal and awarded the Order of Suvorov, 1st Degree – Konev later claimed that this was at his suggestion.[26] He too was promoted to marshal. Vatutin received no medals or promotion. The Soviet Union portrayed the battle as a great victory; as described above, Konev in particular attempted to claim that the Wehrmacht had been dealt a crippling blow, with none of the encircled men escaping. Whilst the scale of the success – even if Konev's claims had been correct – did not approach the haul of prisoners from Stalingrad, it was nonetheless portrayed as the greatest Soviet victory since the surrender of Paulus' army on the shores of the Volga. But even if the bulk of the encircled men escaped, they were still effectively lost to the Wehrmacht for the coming weeks. All of their heavy equipment had been destroyed or abandoned and many of the wounded would not return to front-line service, and for the moment Manstein's Army Group South would have to try to hold back the Red Army without these divisions. Manstein's conclusions show that the ghosts of the previous year still haunted him:

> It had thus been possible to spare both corps the fate suffered by Sixth Army in Stalingrad. In this case, too, Hitler had called for the pocket to be held, but in the end he had consented retrospectively to the breakout preparations ordered by the army group. The latter had then issued the order for the actual breakout without previously notifying Hitler in order to prevent any possibility of a countermand.[27]

Almost immediately, a propaganda battle replaced the physical battle. Soviet sources claimed that Stemmermann had been executed by SS personnel for attempting to break out without clear orders from Hitler, and on the German side there were recriminations about the failure of III Panzer Corps to take – and perhaps more importantly, hold onto – Hill 239. What was beyond question was the scale of the fighting – by the end of the battle, four of the Red Army's six tank armies, and over half of the Wehrmacht's panzer divisions on the Eastern Front, had been involved. What was also beyond question was that despite gathering considerable assets together, the Wehrmacht had failed to break through the Soviet defences to reach the encirclement as originally planned. By contrast, the two Soviet pincers had succeeded in breaking the German defensive lines. Even allowing for terrain and weather considerations – which applied to both sides – this represented further evidence that the Red Army was no longer a force that relied purely on overwhelming numbers. Nor could the Germans rely upon the strike power of their panzer formations to restore difficult situations.

While Hitler summoned senior officers like Lieb and Gille to his headquarters so that they could receive medals from the Führer, Hube held a conference to consider the battle. Several points emerged from this. The conclusions of this discussion were clear. Firstly, the pocket should not have been allowed to form in the first place, and the salient should have been evacuated before the Soviet attacks on its flanks. Secondly, the plans to relieve the pocket and then strike towards Kiev were utterly unrealistic. Finally, both III and XLVII Panzer Corps did everything they could with their limited resources. The Red Army, too, considered the battle, but unlike the Germans – Hube's conference report, written by Wenck, disappeared into the German archives and was not distributed – the Soviet commanders tried to learn from the outcome. If German units were encircled in future, it was essential to disrupt the pocket as rapidly as possible, and in particular there would be far more attention to logistics to ensure that there was sufficient fuel and artillery ammunition to achieve this. Ultimately, the manner in which these lessons were learned would contribute greatly to the Red Army's triumphs during the summer.

CHAPTER 6

KAMANETS-PODOLSKI: THE ENCIRCLEMENT OF FIRST PANZER ARMY

Any views Vatutin might have had about how others assessed his contributions to the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation – and the contributions of his men – are not known. In the past, he had written to Stalin to protest at the manner in which his subordinates had been criticised or even demoted, but there is no record of any communication from him after the conclusion of the fighting. Ordered to take control of fighting in what had previously been the northern sector of his 1st Ukrainian Front, he left management of the forces facing III Panzer Corps to Zhukov and began to prepare his men for a new operation.

Zhukov returned to *Stavka* where he had extensive discussions with Stalin and others on the next campaign. The best opportunity, it seemed, was for 1st Ukrainian Front to advance on a broad frontage, outflanking the German forces in Vinnitsa on its southern wing and pushing towards Lutsk, Shumskoye and Shepetivka in the north. This latter town had already been the scene of bitter fighting in late January, when 7th Panzer Division found itself caught up in a costly battle. Like all German divisions, it was badly worn down by months of continuous action. On 26 January, its highly respected commander, General Hasso von Manteuffel, had been assigned to take command of *Grossdeutschland*; his replacement was Generalmajor Adalbert Schulz. Before dawn two days later, Schulz led the division into action near Shepetivka, as his radio operator later described:

> The enemy had penetrated into Shepetivka and driven out the infantry regiment stationed there. Our mission was to help them regain their old positions. The division advanced. The first radio signals came in. All signals reported 'weak enemy resistance' and 'the advance continues'. Now the general stopped holding back. The old fighting spirit was alight. 'Forwards!' and we drove to an attack group consisting of a few tanks, half-tracks and 20mm self-propelled anti-aircraft guns – these were known as singletons [i.e. single mounts rather than double or quadruple mounts]. This battlegroup was tasked with thrusting along the main road to Shepetivka. The General stood in the turret, surveying the terrain and now and again directed a tank to a favourable target. We reached the command post of the infantry regiment and the general had a prolonged discussion. Meanwhile the spearhead had reached the eastern edge [of Shepetivka]. 'Six enemy tanks and assault guns destroyed.' I passed these first reports of success to the general. He laughed. 'That's my boys!' and 'This evening we'll be back in our old positions.' With these words he left the infantry commander and we now drove into Shepetivka. House-to-house fighting was raging. But the attack proceeded irresistibly. When we encountered the panzer regiment commander, he reported 'Ten enemy tanks destroyed! Three more pulled back and are being pursued.' We reached the area by the railway station and most of the town was back in our hands …
>
> 'Shepetivka has been taken, 13 enemy tanks shot up!' This report arrived at 10am … we drove on at the head of a small battlegroup. 'Mission accomplished,' reported the commander [of the battlegroup]. 'It looks like the advance isn't proceeding over there.'
>
> 'I'll go over myself,' decided the general … and we hurried through the town back to the other battlegroup. It was relatively quiet here and the advance was slow. 'Have you reached your objective?'
>
> 'Wait out.' Encrypted messages were sent. The response was 'Reply coming in three minutes, Herr General.' Meanwhile we were at the spearhead, a couple of tanks, half-tracks and a singleton. Mortars began to fire. 'These damned mortars,' muttered the general. I should point out that he had already been wounded several times by them. About 1.5km away we could see a couple of large buildings with forest beyond. 'Send the singleton to the left!' ordered the general. 'There, on the left in front of the houses, an anti-tank position!' 'Seen!' called the gun commander and rounds soon flashed from his barrel.

> A further enquiry to the panzer regiment, 'Where is the response?' '1135, wait one minute!' came the reply. Then there was a bombardment right on us with the impact of several heavy mortar rounds. 'Herr General, the…' Blood dripped down from above. The driver had already seen it, turned the vehicle in a flash, and motored back. 'As fast as possible to the nearest medic!'[1]

Schulz died shortly after. It was a heavy loss – he had commanded the division's panzer regiment with considerable skill. Such men were almost irreplaceable on both sides. But there was little time for mourning, and the division remained in action, engaging Soviet forces that threatened to push forward across the Styr valley.

Zhukov didn't underestimate the difficulties that his proposed attack created; moving sufficient supplies to the front line in order to sustain such an operation was a considerable challenge, particularly as the spring thaw was expected to cause increasing disruption. But Zhukov calculated that the Germans would not be expecting any renewed effort by the Red Army, for precisely those reasons. Given that adequate reserves were available for one more effort before the muddy season set in, it was a worthwhile risk to try to take the Germans by surprise and to advance to the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. It would take time to bring forward the required supplies, and army commanders decided to put this opportunity to good effect, though the weather was already causing difficulties, as Zhadov, commander of Fifth Guards Army, later recorded:

> During those days we developed a special plan by which the corps were alternately rotated to the rear zone. There, they were replenished with personnel, weapons and other military equipment, and trained for the penetration of deeply echeloned defences. All of this preparatory work had to be done in extremely adverse weather conditions. The onset of the March thaw with frequent rain made the fields and roads impassable for all types of transport. Even tracked vehicles and tractors floundered in the mud. Ammunition, food and other supplies were carried manually to units over tens of kilometres.[2]

While these discussions were taking place – indeed, before the final breakout of *Gruppe Stemmermann* – events continued to unfold further to the southeast. Throughout the second half of January and early February, Vasilevsky, chief of the Soviet general staff, was overseeing operations of 3rd and 4th Ukrainian Fronts and was repeatedly urged by Stalin to show more energy in his attacks. At the very least, these attacks would tie down German forces and prevent Manstein from concentrating resources in the fighting around Korsun; at best, attacks in the east might take advantage of weaknesses created by such transfers, and there might be opportunities to trap significant elements of the German forces in the Dnepr bend before they could withdraw. After repeated attacks on the Nikopol bridgehead failed to make any progress, Vasilevsky concluded that the forces available to him were too weak:

> It was … clear that we would not be able to take the Nikopol bridgehead with our own forces. If we were to continue our attacks in the same way, we would suffer an unjustified number of casualties without even achieving our goal. We had to involve 2nd Ukrainian Front, regroup our troops, and supplement Tolbukhin's troops [i.e. 4th Ukrainian Front] from the reserve. After discussing the situation with Tolbukhin, and getting his support, I decided to telephone *Stavka* from his command post. Stalin did not agree with me, reproaching us for our inability to organise troop operations and control the action. There was nothing I could do but insist on my own position. It resulted in heated words between the two of us and Stalin slamming down the receiver.[3]

Nevertheless, Vasilevsky's words must have made an impression on the Soviet leader. The Soviet Thirty-Seventh Army was transferred from 2nd Ukrainian Front to 3rd Ukrainian Front. In addition, a rifle corps was made available from *Stavka* reserves and a mechanised corps transferred from 4th Ukrainian Front. The intention was to create a sufficiently strong force to conduct a powerful penetration through the Krivoy Rog region. This was the attack that broke on the German lines at the moment when 24th Panzer Division was struggling north to reach Vormann's XLVII Panzer Corps. After heavy fighting, the attack broke through the German lines. Apostolovo changed hands on 5 February and it seemed that the German troops in the Nikopol bridgehead would be encircled before they could withdraw, particularly when 4th Ukrainian Front pushed forward to the lower Dnepr to the south of the German bridgehead. Having lost many of its wheeled vehicles during the abortive march to the north, 24th Panzer Division returned to the area with greatly reduced mobility and was forced to rely on horse-drawn columns for supplies, but the weather continued to play a significant part in operations for both sides. The tired, dispirited personnel of 24th Panzer Division reported that even their tanks could barely manage 2km/hour through the bottomless mud, and breakdowns soared as worn-out engines failed. The only consolation was that the Red Army was equally hindered by conditions, as Vasilevsky wrote:

> I have seen many spring thaws in my time. But the mud, slush and lack of roads that I witnessed in the winter and spring of 1944 were the worst I have ever experienced before or since. Even tractors could hardly move along. The artillery had to carry their own guns. The soldiers helped by local people lugged shells and bullets from place to place over dozens of kilometres.[4]

The Red Army could do little to hinder the orderly withdrawal of German forces from the Nikopol bridgehead. Attention now turned to the Krivoy Rog region – a successful breakthrough here might threaten an advance to the Black Sea, thus isolating both the forces withdrawn from the Nikopol bridgehead and those along the Dnepr further south. Control of Apostolovo was key to how the battle would evolve and both sides struggled to move resources into position – the Red Army planned to pinch off the salient that had developed in German lines around Krivoy Rog, whereas the Wehrmacht was desperate to hold open the line of retreat of Sixth Army from the lower Dnepr. On 10 February, 24th Panzer Division was in position to the south of Apostolovo and its armoured battlegroup attacked, advancing about six miles (10km) into the area to the west of Apostolovo. Soviet counterattacks were beaten off the following day but it proved impossible to reinforce the battlegroup. Instead, it was ordered to withdraw back towards the south. One Pz.IV and six assault guns, which had broken down, had to be abandoned as there were no vehicles available to pull them free of the mud and tow them south. The depleted battlegroup attacked again on 12 and 13 February towards the northeast, once more gaining about six miles and overcoming a Soviet defensive line. The leading elements of the division were barely three miles from Apostolovo, but by dawn on 17 February, there were no tanks or assault guns left operational.[5]

Despite its remaining strength melting away at such an alarming rate, 24th Panzer Division would get no rest. The attacks south of Apostolovo had effectively blunted any Soviet attempt to attack towards the south, but there remained a very weak sector in the German line to the east – between 24th Panzer Division's troops south of Apostolovo and the town of Shirokoye (now Shiroke), a distance of about 18 miles (30km), there was only a thin line of outposts. There were no significant roads in this area, but if the Red Army could capture Shirokoye, it would be able to turn north against Krivoy Rog or south to threaten the rear area of the German Sixth Army. Accordingly, the tired German division – reinforced by elements of 97th *Jäger* Division – was ordered to attack towards the northwest in order to close this gap. The appalling weather prevented reconnaissance flights by either side, and both armies were operating largely without any certainty of the strength or locations of their opponents. On 18 February, the temperature suddenly plummeted and, in poor visibility, the armoured battlegroup – reduced to just a small number of self-propelled anti-tank guns – advanced into the unknown late in the day. It encountered little resistance and by first light the following day was just a short distance from Shirokoye. Over the next two days, the Germans turned north and advanced to the east of Shirokoye. The propaganda officer attached to 24th Panzer Division's description of the fighting is perhaps typical of the manner in which accounts produced by both sides portrayed their successes:

> The wild pursuit continued from village to village. The … squadron commander … shouted over the noise of battle: 'Onwards, onwards!' The objective of the attack had long been passed but he knew no restraint. The fleeing Soviets were left behind – someone else would round them up. The day stretched on but nobody asked for the time, for food, or for a cigarette. Onwards – it was as if they were overcome with the intoxication of Cornet Rilke [the hero of a prose poem that was popular in Germany] …
>
> A ravine, a deep gorge, separated them from the next location. The snow swirled down, but they could see the enemy gathering beyond. Regardless, they surged into the gorge. Engines howled loudly and surged up the opposite slope. The village was covered by 40 machine-guns. Haystacks went up in flames, and the village … turned into a wasps' nest. The Soviets swarmed around the half-tracks. Shots rang out against the steel plates. The resistance was broken – their men, fleeing back without weapons in complete confusion, spread chaos amongst the ranks of those still firing … There was a remarkable haul of booty. A field kitchen, supply dump, a field bakery, vehicles, and horses.[6]

Regardless of the colourful prose, the attack was a remarkable success, given the weak forces available. The gap in the German lines was closed and any Soviet penetration that could threaten the withdrawal of Sixth Army was prevented. But the Germans could do nothing about the Soviet attacks on Krivoy Rog and the town fell to the Soviet Forty-Sixth Army on 22 February. Vasilevsky's account of the achievements of his troops is perhaps more accurate than the one provided by the German propaganda officer:

> Because of black ice and snowdrifts the movement of our motor transport became incredibly difficult. It took a good one and a half hours to travel by car across the

> open steppe from the Front headquarters to Tsvetayev [commander of Fifth Shock Amy, whose headquarters was about five miles away] … Then the sudden breaking up and drifting of ice on the Dnepr and the considerable rising of the water made it impossible for the next two or three days to ferry across Pliev's corps [IV Guards Cavalry Corps] concentrated to the south of Nikopol. It was also hard to deliver all that was needed to Tsvetayev's troops over on the right bank. However, 3rd Ukrainian Front, in spite of the incredible hardships, continued to move forward if only at a slow pace. Nothing on earth – neither the elements nor the desperate resistance of the enemy – was going to stop the Soviet soldiers.[7]

After the escape of the encircled troops from the Korsun pocket, the Germans made alterations to their positions. The vulnerable territory from which III Panzer Corps had launched its last attempt to reach *Gruppe Stemmermann* was abandoned in stages at first without significant incident, though the rearguard of 1st Panzer Division and *LSSAH* endured some difficult moments. There was considerable pressure on Bushanka throughout 20 February but two battalions of panzergrenadiers held the town until first light the following day before they broke contact and pulled out towards the southwest. The establishment of a panzergrenadier battalion consisted of three companies each of about 130 men, a heavy weapons company, and headquarters personnel; these two battalions – one from 1st Panzer Division, and one from *LSSAH* – had been reduced to just 32 and 45 combatants respectively. Their combined strength was therefore less than that of a single company, but they fought with desperate energy to stop the withdrawal being turned into a rout.

The panzer divisions of Breith's III Panzer Corps all pulled back to a line closer to Uman, forced by a shortage of fuel and tractors to use demolition charges to destroy disabled tanks that they might otherwise have attempted to recover. Nevertheless, largely by patching up the vehicles that could be repaired rapidly, the workshop teams of the divisions achieved considerable success: at the end of its withdrawal, 1st Panzer Division reported that it could field 37 Panthers, seven Pz.IVs, and a command tank.[8] But if the personnel of the panzer divisions were hoping for rest, they were disappointed. While 1st Panzer Division remained in line facing the Red Army units that had dogged its withdrawal, Breith used his other divisions to attack towards Eighth Army, finally closing the gap that had existed between First Panzer Army and Eighth Army since the Soviet encirclement of *Gruppe Stemmermann*. It was only after this operation was complete that the divisions were finally able to gather their vastly diminished strength behind the front line and try to rebuild their battalions and regiments.

Zhukov returned to the front line on 21 February and briefed Vatutin on what was required for the new offensive. If the latter was still smarting at the manner in which he had been snubbed by Stalin, Zhukov did not mention it in his memoirs. A week later, the two men met again and Vatutin commented that he had concerns about air support for two of his armies. Zhukov suggested that Vatutin should send staff officers to the headquarters of Thirteenth and Sixtieth Armies to sort matters out, but Vatutin replied that he preferred to visit the formations himself. It proved to be a fateful decision.

For a brief period after the fall of the Romanovs in 1917, Ukraine functioned as an independent state, though it rapidly came under the control of the Central Powers as a result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The defeat of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire effectively terminated this treaty and by the time the Russian Civil War was over, Ukraine was firmly under Bolshevik control and was part of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, nationalists continued to hope for a restoration of independence and there was an upsurge in such sentiment after the famines that ravaged much of Ukraine in the early 1930s. These nationalists hoped that the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany would be followed by a restoration of their independence and the Germans deliberately encouraged such beliefs, even though they had no intention of allowing such developments. The nationalists had created the *Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv* ('Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists' or OUN) in 1929 and a few months before the Germans invaded this group split into two factions – the relatively moderate OUN-M ('*Melnykivtsi*' or 'Melnykites') under Andriy Atanasovich Melnyk and the more radical OUN-B ('*Banderivtsi*' or 'Banderites') led by Stepan Andrijowycz Bandera. Some of the documents produced by the OUN-B immediately before the German invasion give a clear indication of their views:

> National minorities [in Ukraine] are divided into (a) those loyal to us, who are members of the oppressed people, and (b) Muscovites [i.e. ethnic Russians], Poles, and Jews, who are hostile to us. Those in (a) have the same rights as Ukrainians … those in (b) will be destroyed in the fighting, particularly those who try to defend the [Soviet] regime; they will be expelled from their land and destroyed, especially the intelligentsia who cannot be permitted any posts in the governing bodies, and we will make it impossible for more such intellectuals to be 'produced' by denying access to schools etc. The leaders will be liquidated. The Jews as well as the Poles and Muscovites will be isolated and removed from administrative bodies. If there is an insurmountable need for them, Jews will be left in posts in the economic apparatus, but they will be supervised by our militia

> and eliminated at the least infringement. Our leaders can only be Ukrainians, not foreigners, who are enemies. The assimilation of the Jews is not possible.[9]

Further documents were produced, intended as instructions for the future security services that the OUN-B expected it would create:

> There are elements that should be neutralised when a new revolutionary system is created in Ukraine. These elements are: Muscovites, seeking to possess the Ukrainian lands in order to consolidate the power of Moscow in Ukraine; Jews, both individually and as an ethnic group; foreigners, mostly assorted Asians, that Moscow has used to colonise Ukraine with the goal of creating an ethnic chessboard; and the Poles in the western Ukrainian lands who have not renounced their dream of creating *Wielkopolska* ['Greater Poland'].[10]

Such sentiments received enthusiastic support from the Germans, who were perfectly prepared to encourage the creation of Ukrainian police and paramilitary units to help deal with ethnic Russians, Jews, Poles and Communists, but attempts by the OUN-B to establish administrative bodies were rapidly suppressed. Bandera travelled to Lviv, where the Germans arrested him and transported him to Krakow. From there he was taken to Berlin where he was placed under house arrest; he continued to press for the creation of an independent Ukraine, but together with other Ukrainian nationalists he was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp; he remained there until September 1944. He continued to circulate amongst Ukrainian nationalists in exile until he was killed by a KGB agent in 1959.

In Bandera's absence, OUN-B activists decided that their first priority was to fight against 'Moscow-Bolshevik influences', but there was also growing anti-German sentiment. The *Ukrayins'ka Povstans'ka Armiya* ('Ukrainian Insurgent Army' or UPA) was created in late 1942 as the armed wing of the OUN-B and as the tide of war turned against Germany and pro-Soviet partisans increased their activity, the leadership of the OUN-B met in early February 1943 and began to consider armed resistance against the Germans; thereafter, leaflets from the OUN-B increasingly described the Germans as occupiers and invaders. By the summer, there were occasional clashes between UPA units and German troops, but mostly they tended to cooperate with the Germans to fight against the Red Army and pro-Soviet partisans. In the western parts of Ukraine, the activity of the UPA was turned against Poles and other ethnic groups deemed to be hostile to Ukraine, culminating in a series of massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. In the summer of 1943, Dmytro Klyachkivsky, commander of a large part of the UPA, issued a directive to his personnel:

> We should undertake a major action to liquidate Polish elements. As the German Army withdraws, we should take advantage of this convenient moment to liquidate the entire male population aged between 16 and 60. We cannot lose this struggle, and it is utterly essential to weaken pro-Polish forces. Villages and settlements amongst the large forests should be wiped from the face of the earth.[11]

Most of the victims of the massacres were women and children. The worst killing occurred on 11 July 1943 when a total of 167 towns and villages were attacked and up to 8,000 people were killed.

Allegiances became increasingly confused, and there were even cases of pro-Soviet partisans cooperating with the OUN-B against the Germans. However, the nationalists knew that the return of Soviet rule would not further their ambitions for independence and attempted to oppose the Red Army in any way they could. The advancing units of the Red Army widely press-ganged male civilians into their ranks in an attempt to maintain their fighting strength, but these men had little or no training and died in large numbers – one estimate suggests that of men born between 1924 and 1926 who were forcibly conscripted, fewer than 3 per cent survived the war.[12] Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front recruited about 250,000 men in this manner, and the UPA condemned this practice, and ordered that Vatutin should be executed. Whether this order influenced the events that followed is open to question.

On 29 February 1944, the day after his meeting with Zhukov, Vatutin and his escorts drove from the headquarters of Thirteenth Army to visit Sixtieth Army, travelling in two vehicles. As they passed through a small village south of Rivne, the vehicles came under fire from UPA fighters. The size of the UPA group is variously estimated as being between 80 and 200 men, and had earlier attacked a Red Army truck convoy; it is by no means certain that they deliberately attacked Vatutin, and they may merely have fired on 'enemy' vehicles. Zhukov wrote an account of the incident that suggests the attack was a chance encounter:

> At 7.40pm, Nikolai Fyodorovich [Vatutin] and his entourage, driving up to the northern outskirts of the village of Milyatyn, saw a group of about 250–300 men, and at the same time heard shots from this group. On Vatutin's orders, the vehicles stopped to investigate. Suddenly they came under rifle fire from the windows of nearby houses. It was the Banderites [UPA]. Vatutin and his guards jumped from

> the vehicles and tried to cover their retreat. During the firing, Nikolai Fyodorovich was wounded in the thigh. Quickly turning one of the vehicles, three soldiers grabbed Vatutin, put him in the car, and took him towards Rivne.[13]

Vatutin suffered a shattered femur and substantial blood loss as it took over an hour to get him to a place of safety where his wound could be dressed properly. He was taken to Kiev by train, where he was treated with penicillin, but developed gangrene. Surgeons proposed amputation of the limb; in some accounts, Vatutin refused, while others describe that the amputation was carried out but failed to prevent the spread of infection. Eventually, Vatutin died on 15 April. It was a tragic period for his mother. Vatutin had two brothers, Afanasy and Semyon; Afanasy was killed in action in February, and Semyon in March.

Vatutin might have been out of favour when he died, but he had been a leading figure in the fight against the Wehrmacht. The degree to which he was later made the scapegoat for wider failures – especially the manner in which he was singled out for blame when over-optimistic operations went wrong – is open to conjecture. In his memoirs, Konev made no mention of the death of his rival, but Vasilevsky, the chief of the Soviet general staff, was characteristically generous in his assessment of the fallen Front commander:

> [Before the war,] Vatutin displayed the full extent of his strategic wisdom, his knowledge and experience, and by his unflagging work he made a worthy contribution to the training of the Soviet Armed Forces. Vatutin's leadership gift was displayed particularly vividly during the years of the Great Patriotic War. I shall never forget my meetings at the front with him where he had to do so much that was invaluable to our cause … I would like to pay special tribute to his work in carrying out the crucial assignments given to him by the State Defence Committee and *Stavka* in preparing and carrying through vital military operations which he invariably did with flying colours. He was able decisively to concentrate men and materiel in a major direction, summon up every possible effort and suddenly launch powerful attacks … skilfully employing large masses of tanks for pressing home the offensive deep inside the enemy position, organising the close interaction of all types of troops … His name is synonymous with that of an outstanding master of warfare, a passionate patriot of the Soviet Union, a Communist and a popular figure among his troops.[14]

Vengeance against the UPA was swift, and significant numbers of NKVD (*Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* or 'People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs', the Soviet Union's internal security force and forerunner of the KGB) personnel were deployed in the region to suppress the anti-Soviet nationalists. As the year wore on, the UPA negotiated a truce with Polish resistance forces and the Hungarian Army and turned its attention entirely to opposing the return of Soviet power. Fighting in the region continued after the end of the war when major Soviet repressions, including deportation of large numbers of Ukrainians to Siberia and the mass expulsion of Ukrainians from territory that was now controlled by Communist Poland, led to an increase in recruitment. Both sides were guilty of appalling acts of brutality. The UPA had created a counter-intelligence arm earlier in the war, the *Sluzhba Bezbeky* or SB, to deal with informers, and in 1945 members of this body rounded up two families near Lviv who were suspected of having passed information to the communist authorities about the activities of the UPA. The captives were tortured in public before being hacked to death. Other attacks were directed against village leaders, and even farmers who took agricultural produce to collective farms. NKVD personnel came to regard postings to the region as something to be avoided, and retaliated with indiscriminate arrests in areas where the UPA and SB were active. In the years that followed the end of the war, both sides showed little hesitation in torturing and murdering those suspected of being their enemies, and a disproportionate percentage of their victims were women. There were numerous clashes throughout the 1950s, but these were of diminishing significance and by the end of the decade the UPA had effectively ceased to exist.

Zhukov had been the effective commander of much of 1st Ukrainian Front during the closing phases of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation and he now took command of all of its armies. Preparations for the renewal of attacks continued, and inevitably many of these preparations were spotted by the Germans. Manstein informed *OKH* on 22 February that a renewed assault by the Red Army was expected within the next two weeks and, in order to deal with this, he requested freedom of movement. As he had consistently argued, it would be necessary to pull troops from the southeast flank of his army group and move them west – this would both reduce the risk of units being cut off, and would create sufficient forces with which he could parry the coming attacks. He cannot have been surprised when, as had been the case in the past, Hitler turned down his request – he was fully aware that his proposal was contrary to Hitler's preferred solution for holding firm and defending stubbornly. Instead, the Führer made clear to Manstein that he intended to expand the use of his most recent innovation:

> At this stage of operations Hitler thought he had found a new means of bringing the enemy's advance to a standstill. Henceforth places which had acquired a tactical significance as nodal points of road or rail traffic were to be declared

> 'fortresses'. Each was allotted an ad hoc commander or *Kampfkommandant*, who was in honour bound to defend the locality in question and answered for it with his head. The armies in whose sectors Hitler had personally selected such 'fortresses' were responsible for stocking them up at an early date and providing adequate garrisons. Hitler assumed that by blocking important roads or diverting Soviet forces, these places would serve to delay the advance. In fact it was clear from the outset that they would achieve no such thing. In practice they required more troops to defend them than was worth devoting to their retention. Since 'fortresses' without proper fortifications or adequate garrisons must inevitably fall to the enemy sooner or later without fulfilling their intended purpose, the army group in every case but one contrived to get them abandoned before they were hopelessly surrounded.[15]

As Raus later wrote, the designation of fortresses was often based purely on the exigencies of the moment and on the basis of maps without any regard for the lie of the land:

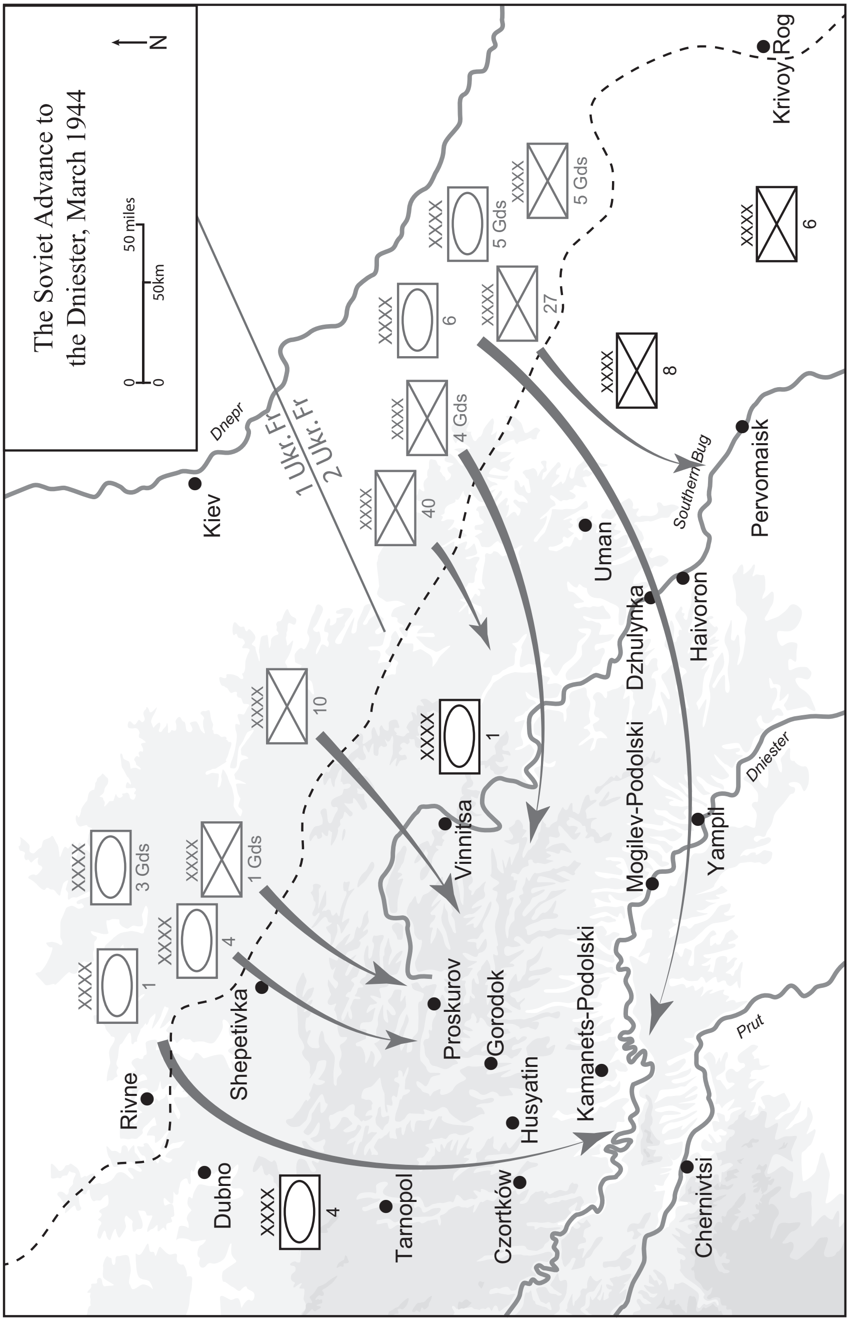
> The location of some of these fortresses was so unfavourable that their defence seemed hopeless from the outset. Despite all remonstrances, even these places had to be held at all costs. For example, Brody, a small town in eastern Galicia completely surrounded by woodland, was located in a valley without observation facilities. Dominated by a nearby plateau in Soviet hands, the town was under complete enemy observation and at the mercy of his artillery. At one point the woods even reached up to the edge of the town. Because of the lack of space, there was not even a suitable area for XIII Corps to locate artillery emplacements in case of a siege.[16]

Manstein operated within the limits of what he was permitted to do and tried to shift the centre of gravity of his forces towards the west. There remained a substantial gap to the north of his northwest flank between Fourth Panzer Army and Army Group Centre's Second Army and he ordered Raus to move elements of his army towards the north to cover this gap. At the same time, First Panzer Army took over the front line north of Tarnopol (now known as Ternopil), thus freeing some of Raus' troops for the move to the north; Eighth Army took control of the front line near Uman; and the eastern corps of Eighth Army was passed to Sixth Army.

After a thoroughly inadequate pause for rest, 1st Panzer Division was ordered to proceed with all speed from its current location near Uman to an area to the south of Shepetivka, a distance of about 170 miles (274km). The first elements of the division reached the new area late on 2 March, with some units proceeding by road while the heavy tracked vehicles were moved by rail. Here, the division's artillery regiment received sufficient replacements to bring its heavy battalion back to full strength, and perhaps two dozen new Panther tanks appeared over the next two days. After so many delays in entering production, the Panther was now being built in large numbers, with about 200 being completed every month.[17] But with over 30 Wehrmacht and SS panzer divisions and several independent Panther-equipped brigades in the field, and with losses running at almost the same level as German industry could build new tanks, there was little chance of restoring any division to full strength. Each Panther battalion had an establishment strength of about 90 tanks, and several divisions were still awaiting their first Panthers, with the result that there were fewer available as replacements. The inherent unreliability of the Panther design also led to reduced production, with capacity having to be diverted to making spare parts for broken-down vehicles.

Further reinforcements were being sent to the same area. The panzer division *SS-Das Reich* had been held in reserve some distance to the west of Berdichev for much of the year, covering attempts by the Red Army to exploit the gap that remained between the left flank of Fourth Panzer Army (and therefore the left flank of Army Group South) and the right flank of Second Army (and therefore the right flank of Army Group Centre). The division had been weakened by fighting in late 1943, but at the start of 1944 its armoured battlegroup, which represented the main strike power of the division, numbered 4,500 men. It is an indication of the wearing nature of the constant demands placed upon it in early 1944 that just six weeks later, it reported that it had lost 1,121 men killed, wounded or missing since the beginning of the year.[18] In the last week of February, *SS-Das Reich* was moved to the area immediately north of Shepetivka and was almost instantly drawn into fighting around Isyaslaw, to the west of Shepetivka. The intention behind its redeployment had been for it to be available as an armoured reserve, but constant Soviet pressure resulted in the armoured battlegroup remaining in the front line, with little opportunity for rest.

The terrain over which the coming battles would be fought was markedly different from the ground that had been contested in 1943 and the first months of 1944. The region had formerly been the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, and stretched along the northern edge of the Carpathian Mountains. These mountains form a substantial barrier between the relatively flat terrain

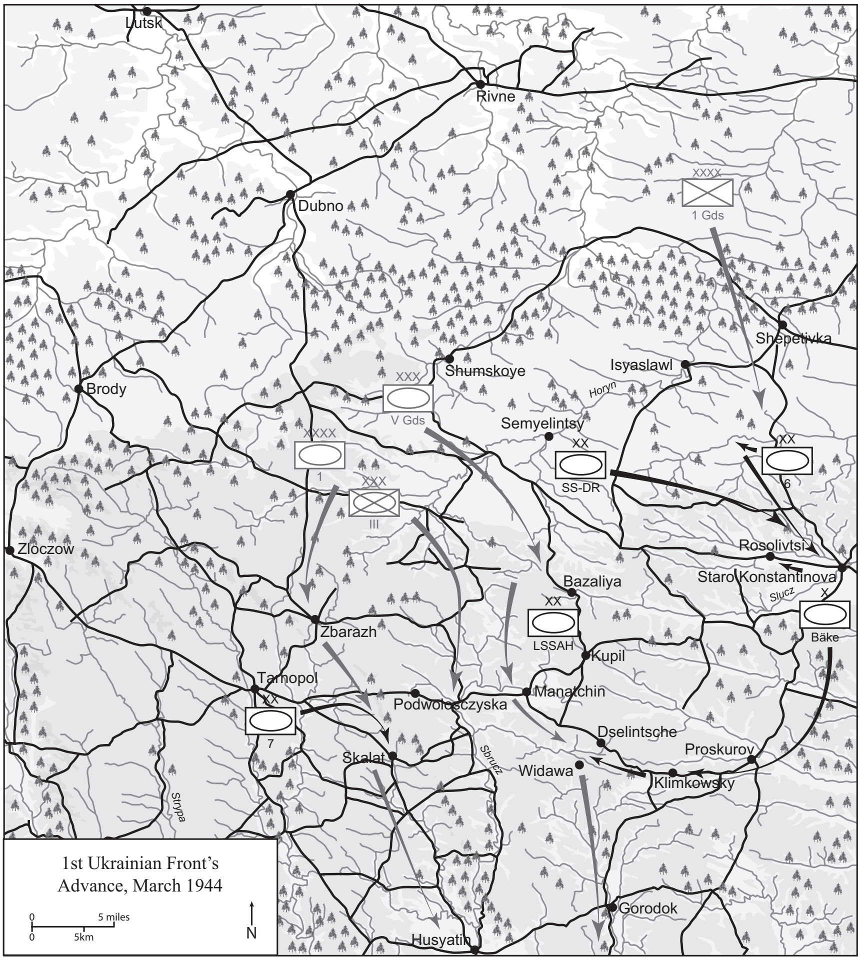


The Soviet Advance to the Dniester, March 1944

N
0 50 miles
0 50km
Dnepr
Kiev
1 Ukr. Fr
2 Ukr. Fr
XXXX 5 Gds
XXXX 5 Gds
XXXX 6
XXXX 27
XXXX 4 Gds
XXXX 40
XXXX 8
XXXX 6
Krivoy Rog
Southern Bug
Pervomaisk
Uman
Dzhulynka
Haivoron
XXXX 10
XXXX 1
Vinnitsa
Mogilev-Podolski
Yampil
Dniester
XXXX 3 Gds
XXXX 1 Gds
XXXX 4
XXXX 1
Shepetivka
Proskurov
Gorodok
Kamanets-Podolski
Husyatin
Rivne
Dubno
XXXX 4
Tarnopol
Czortków
Chernivtsi
Prut

to the north and northeast and Hungary and Romania to the west and southwest, with a limited number of passes; these passes had been the scene of bitter fighting in the First World War, with both sides suffering terrible casualties in appalling conditions. A short distance from the northern edge of the Carpathians, the Prut River runs first east, then southeast, towards the Black Sea, fed by a series of tributaries. These tributary rivers – particularly in the terrain between the Carpathians and the Prut – tend to run from the mountains in the southwest to the Prut in the northeast, and their valleys are separated by rugged lines of hills, with much of the region covered by woodland. Before reaching the Carpathian foothills, the Red Army would have to negotiate the terrain north of the Dniester. Entering this area from the north, the Soviet troops would face steadily rising ground, with much of the region 300m or more above sea level. As a consequence of its altitude, the area has high rainfall, which – combined with the lower temperatures of altitude – would result in regular snow well into the year. The multitude of rivers, small and large, across this region show the level of precipitation in a typical year. Whilst there were many roads in the area, few ran in an ideal direction to aid the Soviet advance, and in any case they would deteriorate rapidly as armoured vehicles ploughed along them.

The reinforcements dispatched to Shepetivka arrived barely in time. Zhukov's 1st Ukrainian Front moved forward on 4 March. Katukov's First Tank Army was in reserve behind the northern flank, waiting to exploit a breakthrough that would be secured by the infantry. As was almost universally the case, the movement of troops was greatly hindered by the weather, but given the damage inflicted upon roads and railways by the retreating Germans, the Red Army managed to concentrate men, equipment and supplies with remarkable efficiency. The initial assault was made by Sixtieth and First Guards Armies, thrusting south; it was a development that Manstein had long feared, threatening to tear open the seam between his First and Fourth Panzer Armies and then continue south to cut off much of the army group. The tired infantry divisions of the German XIII Corps were driven back on either side of Dubno, and in just two days the Red Army opened a breach about 30 miles (50km) wide in the German lines. The speed with which this was achieved is noteworthy – in battles later in the year, the Germans would complain bitterly about the inability or unwillingness of their Romanian allies to stop Soviet attacks, but it seems that German infantry units were often overwhelmed just as swiftly as Romanian units. The few remaining tanks of *SS-Das Reich* soon found themselves in the thick of the fighting. A Tiger tank crewman later recalled that he and his


Lutsk
Rivne
Dubno
XXXX
1 Gds
Shepetivka
Isyaslawl
Shumskoye
XXX
V Gds
Horyn
Brody
Semyelintsy
XXXX
1
XX
SS-DR
XX
6
XXX
III
Zloczow
Rosolivtsi
Staro Konstantinova
Bazaliya
Slucz
X
Bäke
XX
LSSAH
Zbarazh
Kupil
Tarnopol
XX
7
Manatchin
Podwoloczyska
Dselintsche
Proskurov
Skalat
Sbrucz
Widawa
Klimkowsky
Strypa
1st Ukrainian Front's Advance, March 1944
0
5 miles
0
5km
N
Gorodok
Husyatin

comrades had been preparing for an attack of their own when the Soviet offensive broke:

> Russian deserters who had crossed to the German lines shortly after midnight confirmed the massing of powerful Soviet forces at the front and said that the expected major attack would come this morning. Until now, one had generally dismissed such reports on our side; the planned German counterthrust was to be carried out in any event. But what tragic confusion was about to occur!

… It was 0615. Up ahead the first Pz.IV with its black spaced armour skated along the frozen road in tight turns, in order to be ready for departure. Our entire bodies shivered with the cold; the village around us echoed with the rumble of engines and the clatter of tracks.

And then it all quickly went to hell. While we were still guiding the drivers and the difficult-to-handle tanks moved out along the road between the mud huts, Russian harassing fire suddenly fell on the village. A deep howl passed overhead. Somewhere amongst the huts a cloud of smoke and flames rose, and then dispersed to be replaced by the next impact … Endemann set out with his command tank leading, followed by Kloskowski, the commander of the Pz.IV company … The column roared out of the abandoned village across a small wooden bridge over a small gully at the northern edge. There was another short pause; a brief exchange over the headsets informed the crew of the attack objective.

Minutes later – the slowly approaching dawn made it possible to see a little – our armoured monsters set off from the edge of the village over the crusty, dark plain. With every gear change, the engines sent out metre-long flames from their exhausts, dazzling the eyes of those following. The Russian artillery fire fell right on our attacking ranks and moved forwards with us at the same pace. The morning cold penetrated through all the cracks and the open commanders' hatches, from where we tried to make out the ground over which we were attacking in our binoculars. In front of us, the light tanks formed a firing line; over there, a tank drove into a ditch and became stuck. If only we could at least see something! Suddenly, huge artillery rounds landed amongst the tanks: the enemy had spotted us before we could make out their positions. The Russians blazed away at the German tank attack with all barrels, with all available calibres. The explosions hurled the torn earth high into the air, and shrapnel and lumps of earth crashed against the hull of the Tiger.

It had grown generally lighter and we could see further. Thankfully we could now at least orientate ourselves and work out where the enemy was. Our light company was already heavily engaged; the roar of their guns was deafening.

… To our right, the massed Soviet infantry swarmed forward across the entire breadth of the front line before our very eyes. As far as we could see, there were brown spots moving forward: thousands upon thousands! The German infantry, just a few drops in the sea, abandoned their positions when they saw this and ran back to save their lives …

Flares climbed up, hissing and popping, amidst the clattering of countless machine-guns. One bit of bad news followed another on the radio.[19]

The Tiger tanks were now ordered to redeploy in an attempt to head off the Soviet infantry attack:

> Back, back! Turn right, 300m to the railway station! The shattered ruins and shacks looked bleak, abandoned by the German infantry. Craters, rubble and fragments of wall, and fear of close-quarter combat, kept us away from the ruins.
>
> Then we reached an embankment and could clearly see our fate approaching over the wide, cold plain: thousands and thousands of Russian soldiers! As far as we could see to the horizon, Russian infantry were on the march, interspersed with horses pulling flak and anti-tank guns. Such hordes! But now beams and walls crashed down; snow whirled up, the earth shuddered beneath massive tank tracks. Our tanks smashed through everything and took up firing positions amongst the ruins.
>
> Our machine-guns were already blazing, our tracers flew into the brown ranks, and they turned in confusion and then threw themselves to the ground. A high explosive 88mm shell struck the field; with every shell, clouds of dirt rose up over the enbankment and obscured our vision. The ventilator whirred quietly. One ammunition box after another was emptied; cartridges poured from the guns. The tank shook and rattled … We were filled with the fever of battle and forgot about our surroundings or danger. Row after row of Russian soldiers fell. But more and more of them approached …
>
> We had no idea whether the fighting had been going on for one hour or two. Hundreds of machine-gun rounds clattered against our steel hull. At one point the Red Army men tried to approach us under the shelter of the ruins in order to engage us at close quarters, but our shells flashed out into their ranks and wrecked their plans. Through close cooperation, our three Tigers drove the huge Russian wave to ground and brought the attack to a halt, if only temporarily.[20]

The battle was almost a miniature of the problems faced by the Wehrmacht along the entire Eastern Front: strong units could stop the Red Army at one location, but problems immediately arose elsewhere. Further orders now arrived advising the Tiger crews that in their absence, the group of Pz.IVs with which they had started the day was in danger of being overrun and required covering fire while it fell back. The Tigers took up position facing what seemed like an endless horde of T-34s. At first, they succeeded in stopping the attack, knocking out '20 or 30' Soviet tanks, but once more they realised they were being outflanked. Pausing to allow wounded German crewmen from knocked-out tanks to climb onto their hulls, the three Tigers set off along the bank of the Horyn River towards the village of Semyelintsy, where there was a bridge strong enough to take the weight of their tanks, aware that according to radio reports, the village was already in Soviet hands. After a brief discussion, the tank crews decided that they had no choice: they would have to try to break through the village in order to escape across the bridge.

> The faster, the better! Now, only speed and surprise would help us. But when he tried to turn, von Einböck became hopelessly bogged down: even the floor of the tank was grounded, and the running gear churned deeper and deeper into the water and mud. Time was running out. The order was given: 'Crew, bail out! Destroy the tank!' All ambulatory wounded set off immediately over the river and the nearby high ground towards the south to reach the German lines under their own steam. Quickly, in keeping with our plan, we turned our guns and fired two rounds at short range into Einböck's Tiger.
>
> Tegthoff led us back along the same road, with no regard for the enemy who was to one side. The tracks hurled the frozen earth high into the air across the plain. Turning to the left a little later, Tegthoff drove into a dip and climbed the slope towards Semyelintsy, right through a horse-drawn enemy flak battery, and the horses and soldiers scattered in terror and fell to the ground. We had seldom seen such terrified faces and bulging eyes, as if their hearts were in their mouths. Through the periscope we watched them scattering and taking cover.
>
> Then something happened that took our breath away: the engine revs began to drop. Fink changed down from one gear to another. Our speed dropped steadily, and our distance from Tegthoff increased. There was no doubt that our engine was damaged. Fink confirmed it but couldn't say what the problem was. And all this on the road to breaking out in the midst of an enemy column. Our faces grew as pale and terrified as those of our enemies. Instinctively I ordered the radio operator: 'Transmit: Tegthoff is to halt! Our engine has broken down.' We sent the message twice. In those strained seconds, Tegthoff sent no reply but continued towards Semyelintsy at high speed, and was then engaged by waiting enemy tanks: a hit! Immediately followed by a second! Explosion and smoke, fragments of men, tracks and machinery! Tegthoff, his loader and gunner bailed out, but the driver and radio operator were dead. The wounded on the hull were either wounded or killed.
>
> 'Driver, turn hard right,' was the order to Fink and it was carried out without us being hit. We remained halted for seconds in order to take Tegthoff aboard and then rolled back behind a crest. We saw men clambering up the front of the tank

and onto the hull and clinging on. Then the Russians seized their opportunity and swarmed towards our tank from their wagons.

Tegthoff lay across the driver's hatch and waved to us. Unfortunately his coat tails were hanging over the driver's viewer and he couldn't see … Once more we saw Tegthoff signalling: we had to move faster! That was the last from him. During these moments, while the driver was told which way to go, and instructions were given to the radio operator and gunner, everyone who could find space crawled in through the loader's hatch. Groaning, blood oozing from wounds, their clothing shredded by explosions, some with bloody faces, others unwounded and full of fear.

And in these moments the last German tank experienced a new misfortune – one we had never had before! All enemy tanks and anti-tank guns now opened fire and concentrated on our Tiger. The hull and front armour rang with impacts. There were hits on the sides, front and rear. We saw muzzle flashes from all sides, from positions we hadn't detected. One hit on the front hurled Tegthoff's body into the air and threw him against the mantlet; but his death restored the driver's field of view. We drove once more through the swampy ground to the bank of the Horyn. How much longer would our engine hold out?

Suddenly a hit set the engine ablaze: flames burst through the bulkhead into the fighting compartment! We shouted to the driver and loader to trigger the automatic fire extinguishers – thank God, the fire went out; the engine roared again! The further east we moved, the fewer hits there were on us.

But now – it seemed like the end to us – there was a huge impact on the loader's hatch; a bright flash went through the fighting compartment and tore away Mateika's left forearm. Full of pain, he held out his stump towards us while another man sank silently from the turret ring and a third bled from under his cap. And smoke and dust everywhere while we desperately tried to bandage the wounded.

For the second time we stood on the bank of the Horyn and could go no further; every route out was blocked by the river or swamps. The tank was lost, but the commander could at least save his men if at all possible. As flames once more spread from the engine into the fighting compartment, the commander gave the order to bail out. All that remained was to flee across the river and the ridge towards the German lines, which had fallen back some distance …

We leaped out of the hatches in a flash and dropped to the ground, ran to the right side of the tank, which was sheltered from the enemy, and waited until all the wounded had left the vehicle; then we ran south over the ridge.

> Over there we saw the raised heads of Russian soldiers looking over, between 40 and 100m away across the frozen swamp. The first wounded had already crossed the river and climbed the far bank while we stood unarmed by our bank in the shelter of the tank, and slid out over the ice, sinking knee-deep into the freezing water. On the other bank we hauled up Einböck, who was limping badly; we were the last across. The stillness around us seemed unreal after the explosions and engine noise. The next seconds would decide whether we could reach the high ground. The Ivans knew and could see where we were, and could shoot at us as if at rabbits. We ran across, hunching low, dragging the groaning Einböck with us. We could hear the blood roaring in our ears as we gasped for breath. The others had already moved on ahead.
>
> Why were the Ivans not firing? At least we had reached the high ground. Our winter clothing clung heavily to our limbs. No hats, no weapons. Then we felt a moment of cold fear: we looked around and saw why the Russians weren't firing. Barely 30m behind us we saw them hurrying forward – they wanted to capture us! Einböck also realised that he couldn't go any faster with his wound. He repeatedly muttered, 'Don't leave me behind, take me with you!' We climbed the slope and beyond was a bare meadow about 2km wide, in which a herd of cows was grazing. No German soldiers anywhere. We heard the Russians shouting, now 20m away, and then we had to let Einböck slip to the ground; it was now a matter of saving our own lives. Crazy fear drove our hearts and gave us unbelievable strength. We plunged into the meadow towards the herd of cows. We could no longer tell if those were rifle shots flying past us or the blood rushing through our ears. We ran through the cows, gasping for breath, fell to the ground, raised our heads and saw the Ivans gathered around the fallen Einböck. There was the sound of pistol shots: they had just shot him!
>
> We rose up again and rushed on, using the bodies of the cows as cover, racing in zigzags across the meadow, the occasional zip of rifle shots in our ears. Breathless, almost exhausted, our knees trembling, we fell and stumbled through the meadow, glanced around, grateful for the physical training that gave us the endurance and speed to have saved our lives.[21]

The remaining Tiger crewmen managed to reach their lines without further incident. The day had cost *SS-Das Reich* 12 tanks, including its last three Tiger tanks; they estimated that they had destroyed 31 Soviet tanks.

The summary execution of the German tank crewman was by no means an isolated incident. Flemish volunteers had served in a Flemish Legion near Leningrad in 1942, and this group was organised into *SS-Sturmbrigade*

Langemarck during 1943. Many members of the new SS unit refused to take the obligatory oath of loyalty in protest that their unit was named after a First World War battlefield instead of being permitted to bear a national name like *SS-Wallonien*. The dissenters were promptly transferred to penal units.[22] Reinforced with assault guns, *SS-Langemarck* returned to the Eastern Front in late 1943 and fought alongside *SS-Das Reich*, and its personnel found themselves in the path of the new Soviet assault:

> Cut off by the surprise Russian armoured thrust, surrounded and often given up as lost, just a few managed to break through to German lines after days of being hunted. Several German and Flemish prisoners were stripped of their boots, socks, trousers and underwear, and then machine-gunned by Soviet tanks like a herd of cattle.[23]

To the east of the breach in the German front – on the western flank of First Panzer Army – was LIX Corps, which was fortunate to have 6th Panzer Division available as a reserve. Ever since the establishment of the panzer arm, a recurring mantra of the commanders of armoured units was Guderian's phrase *Klotzern, nicht kleckern* – 'a flood, not a trickle'. This referred to the tendency of defensively minded commanders to disperse armoured forces to help the static defence of front lines rather than allowing the armour to be held in a concentrated reserve, able to intervene en masse, and despite the resistance of Generalmajor Rudolf Freiherr von Waldenfels, the commander of 6th Panzer Division, he found himself ordered to parcel out his precious resources to infantry units. Perhaps in response to complaints raised by the division commander, Manstein messaged LIX Corps to question the deployment of 6th Panzer Division's assets, but the reality was that without immediate armoured support, German infantry units had little staying power in the face of a Soviet armoured attack. As the attack developed, the units that had been sent to help shore up the front line proved to be too few and too weak to make much of a difference, while at the same time depriving Waldenfels of the concentration of power that he needed to mount successful counterattacks.

The armoured battlegroup of 6th Panzer Division, supported by elements of *SS-Das Reich*, was ordered to attack westwards into the flank of the Soviet advance, but long experience had taught the Red Army to expect such counterthrusts. As they moved forward, 6th Panzer Division's tanks ran into a strong line of anti-tank guns, which rapidly brought the attack to a halt with six tanks knocked out in a few moments. As the battle continued, another tank was lost, and the Germans were driven back, losing a total of 13 tanks to enemy action and three more when they had to be abandoned following mechanical breakdowns.[24] As it was clear that a counterattack at this location had no chance of success, 6th Panzer Division was ordered to pull back to the south of Staro Konstantinovka (now the Ukrainian town of Starokostyanyniv), northeast of Proskurov. Many roads converged on the town from the north in order to use the bridge over the Slucz River, and these rapidly became choked with traffic as rear area units, stragglers, and units like 6th Panzer Division struggled to move south towards Proskurov (now known as Khmelyntskyi). Almost unopposed, Zhukov's armour streamed through open ground to the west of Staro Konstantinovka, heading south. In order to protect the units attempting to move south along the road to Proskurov, 6th and 19th Panzer Divisions took up defensive positions to the north and west of Staro Konstantinovka. The latter division received reinforcements in the shape of the remaining combat elements of *SS-Das Reich*, effectively no more than a modest battlegroup; together with his staff, Gruppenführer Heinz Lammerding, the division commander, was ordered to proceed back to Germany by train, where he would oversee the assembly of replacement battalions with which *SS-Das Reich* would be returned to full strength.[25] The Red Army soon put the German defences to the test, with the leading elements of First Guards Army attacking towards the town.

Oberstleutnant Bäke, who had led his improvised regiment to the very edge of the Korsun encirclement, was once more given command of an ad hoc formation. His new group consisted of 1st Panzer Division's Panther tank battalion, the Tiger tanks of *Schwere Panzer Abteilung 509*, and a few tanks from 6th Panzer Division, and he was ordered to attack west from Staro Konstantinovka. At first, he made good progress, reaching Rosolivtsi, about eight miles (13km) from his start line, but this was largely because most of the Soviet armour had already passed to the south. Without infantry to hold the ground that he had covered, Bäke had no alternative but to pull back to safety. On 8 March, the attacks on Staro Konstantinovka by First Guards Army began to drive back the defences, and a decision was made to abandon the town.

In an attempt to intercept the Soviet forces that were threatening to break up Manstein's front, *LSSAH* had deployed near Bazaliya, but like the units of 6th Panzer Division further to the east it could do little other than report the passage of large columns of Soviet armour past either flank. *LSSAH* was in poor shape. Although it had received some replacement drafts since it had fought in the rearguard of III Panzer Corps, its combat formations reported that they had only 28–38 per cent of their establishment strength, and the number of available tanks had fallen to just seven.[26] The division's headquarters was a little to the south in Kupil, and the staff soon found themselves fighting for their lives as parts of the Soviet V Guards Tank Corps attempted to penetrate into the town. The rear area units of *LSSAH* were further south in the small town of Manatshin, believing that they were safe behind the front line, but on 5 March they had a nasty surprise:

> In the early hours the alarm sounded. We readied all the vehicles for movement. That was a rather difficult process, for reasons mainly stemming from the Italian-made Bianchi and OM trucks.
>
> All of a sudden, Russian tanks broke through and fired upon the town. All the vehicles belonging to the ration supply team, the bakery company, and the division supply unit drove off immediately, and almost all of them got away. Every man available, mostly from the bakery company, was put into action as infantry. The subsequent defensive combat lasted several days. Four or five of the days qualified as hand-to-hand combat …
>
> All hell broke loose … At the height of the fighting, our old comrade Hauptsturmführer Graetz [commander of an anti-tank company in one of the division's panzergrenadier regiments] showed up. At the time, he was serving as part of the officer reserve. He had pulled together the men of the bakery company and retreating soldiers from other units to form a fighting force. Supported by just two broken-down tanks stuck in Manatshin, Graetz was able not only to repulse this attack, but to lead his 'Kampfgruppe Graetz' in a counterattack … For his actions, he received the Knight's Cross.[27]

The Soviet troops were from V Guards Tank Corps, and other elements of the corps bypassed Manatshin and cut the railway line running from Lviv to Odessa between Tarnopol and Proskurov. With their supply lines stretching back over a considerable stretch of ground where isolated German units were still fighting, the Soviet tanks had to pause for breath, but a substantial gap now existed between Fourth Panzer Army to the west and First Panzer Army to the east. Once again, a Soviet attack fell on the junction between major German formations, resulting in the defenders retreating on diverging axes. The personnel of *LSSAH* did what they could to prevent a complete rupture of the front, even constructing an improvised armoured train using a locomotive and two flatcars that were found abandoned and loading two disabled Pz.IVs onto them, but such measures were no substitute for the fresh troops that were needed to build a line that was capable of offering prolonged resistance.

Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front began its offensive a day after Zhukov's attack. The formations of Konev's armies fielded some 670 tanks and assault guns, but the losses of the heavy fighting of the winter had left the rifle divisions short of men; Konev later wrote that the average division fielded fewer than 5,000 men. He went on to add that 'fascist divisions' had double that number, but given the losses the Wehrmacht had suffered, it is highly unlikely that German infantry divisions were in any better state than their Soviet counterparts, and this seems to be another occasion when a Soviet writer ignored the difference between combatants and support troops.[28] The attack by 2nd Ukrainian Front would be on two axes. The main thrust would be towards Uman, and if a breakthrough was achieved would continue towards the Carpathian passes, Balti and Iaşi. The secondary attack would be to the south of the main thrust, aimed at Novo Ukrainka, to the southwest of Kirovograd, in order to safeguard the southern flank of the main group. The main strike power of 2nd Ukrainian Front would be provided by Second Tank Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army, and additionally Sixth Tank Army was held in reserve along with V Guards Cavalry Corps. Even though these formations were far from full strength, they still represented a considerable concentration of power.

Konev's initial artillery bombardment lasted slightly less than an hour. The weather remained capricious, and the day was mild and foggy. Despite operating without air support and with their artillery assets unable to observe the effect of their fire, the Soviet units attacked with energy and swiftly broke the German line; by the end of 5 March, the tanks of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army were pushing forward and had already advanced about eight miles (13km).

After the escape of *Gruppe Stemmermann*, some of the panzer divisions that had struggled to reach the encirclement had been able to get a well-deserved break. The exhausted men of 14th Panzer Division handed over their positions to 376th Infantry Division and pulled back to a rest area to the southeast, around the village of Suchaya Kaligorka:

> The men were most astonished when they learned that there was no new order for further operations, but that suggestions that a short period of rest and replenishment was planned were well founded. They knew from their personal experiences the fragile and disintegrating circumstances of the so-called 'front' and what a risk was being taken if one or other unit was pulled out. They were all the more delighted, after all the filth and mud, all the hard fighting of recent days, to have a solid roof over their heads for a few days and to be able to address their external appearance and their inner needs. The division command hoped to use

> this opportunity to refill the thinned ranks of their regiments and battalions and at least to replace some of the material shortages …
>
> The first consequent step was that *Gruppe von Brese*, which had returned from the Cherkassy encirclement, was greeted by the division commander and once more restored to the division, and equipped with essential weapons and equipment. A few reinforcements also arrived. The truck state improved through the intensive repair efforts of the workshop companies and other replacement units, including the transfer of a number of trucks from Eighth Army. But the planned reassignment of trucks and the remaining tanks of 11th Panzer Division, which was to embark for the west, did not take place …
>
> The panzer regiment, whose state had frequently been the subject of concern for some considerable time, was once more the centre of attention. Since October 1943, a total of 44 Pz.IVs, 37 assault guns, three flamethrower tanks, and one command tank had been written off. This was easily three quarters of its original strength. Despite a shortage of spare parts, what remained had been repeatedly patched up; and it was easy enough to calculate how long this modest number would last.
>
> What would then become of the tankless division was largely unclear. Under the present circumstances, it was quite possible that the entire complex and well-drilled structure would one day simply collapse and be ‘consumed’ as an infantry battlegroup. In such an event, whether the well-trained and highly experienced tank crews, who had so far been kept together by improvisation, would ever be re-equipped, and would be able to resume their intended purpose, remained to be seen.
>
> During an official journey in December and January, Oberst Langkeit had conversations with relevant authorities, but to date without tangible success. In particular, the fact that the re-equipment in France of I Battalion with Panthers had made no progress and that in any event it was not at all certain whether it would return to the division or would be deployed elsewhere, given the difficult situation on all fronts, was particularly painful.
>
> The consequence of this last point was once again that, as always, we had to make do with our remaining tanks and restore anything that hadn’t been reduced to scrap metal to operational use.[29]

When Konev’s new offensive broke, 376th Infantry Division bore the full brunt and 14th Panzer Division was ordered to move to the northwest, leaving behind those elements that had been rendered immobile by the loss of vehicles. The days after the conclusion of the breakout from the Korsun encirclement had allowed Eighth Army to shorten its front a little, but the local reserves that had thus been created were minimal and were soon consumed in the fighting. The Red Army appeared to be hindered more by the mud than the German defences, and a prolonged defence was beyond the resources of the German troops. On 7 March, the main thrust by 2nd Ukrainian Front reached the Gorny Tikysh River, a little to the northeast of Uman. This was the first major river in the path of Konev's forces and his planning for the operation had anticipated difficulties in crossing the relatively small river – much like the Gniloy Tikysh, which played such a significant part in the events around the Korsun encirclement, the Gorny Tikysh ran in a relatively deep valley with swampy areas on either bank. Had sufficient troops been available, the Wehrmacht might have brought the Red Army to a halt here, at least for a brief while. Almost unmolested, Konev's combat engineers set to work constructing bridges to allow the Soviet armour to continue its exploitation. It was a sign of the progress that the Red Army had made in its planning that the engineers and their equipment were sufficiently far forward to go to work with little delay.

Although it had not been involved in the fighting around the Korsun encirclement, *Grossdeutschland* had enjoyed little rest, with its panzergrenadiers required to remain in the front line as the infantry divisions were too weak to take over that particular sector. When Konev's troops moved forward, the division suffered an early setback when Otto Büsing, the commander of the panzer regiment who had led the unsuccessful attempt to break into the rear of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army in the opening phases of the Korsun encirclement, was fatally wounded during a mortar bombardment. Much of the artillery of *Grossdeutschland* was overrun on the first day but the line was held, though the Red Army made several deep penetrations. Bitter fighting continued over the next few days with heavy losses on both sides, and on 10 March the division received orders to dispatch its rear area units west to Romania:

> The picture in the division's rear areas was a disconsolate one in those days: train [i.e. rear area] units of every kind streaming to the rear; vehicles creeping along, badly in need of repairs, trucks towing Kübelwagens; gun tractors with other wheeled vehicles in tow; among them *panje* wagons and herds of cattle, with military police as herdsmen. There were military and state police in questionable uniforms, captured vehicles, some of American origin like Fords and Studebakers and many other types, barely still roadworthy.[30]

Two days later, the combat elements of the division were ordered to pull back to the west. A somewhat chaotic race developed, with neither side certain of the location of the enemy. With the roads choked with abandoned or bogged-down vehicles, many units resorted to driving along the railway line; there was consternation when one train carrying *Grossdeutschland* troops west was informed that Soviet troops were just five miles to the north, also heading west. Fortunately for the Germans, the train managed to avoid detection.

Uman, the base from which First Panzer Army had launched its attempts to reach *Gruppe Stemmermann*, fell to Konev's forces on 10 March, and the following day Manstein ordered a withdrawal to the line of the Southern Bug, where he hoped to be able to bring the Red Army to a halt, but given the road conditions, it was likely that the withdrawal would turn into a laborious struggle as both sides tried to reach the river. The Red Army captured Graivoron on 13 March, and two days later the leading elements broke into open space between First Panzer Army and Eighth Army, giving them a clear path to the Southern Bug. Any planned defence of the river line was now almost impossible. In keeping with his new policy, Hitler declared Vinnitsa a fortress, to be held to the last man, but in the prevailing turmoil there was no possibility of deploying sufficient troops to the area to make the proclamation a reality. The city fell to the Red Army on 20 March.

Before the war, Vinnitsa had had a substantial Jewish population. When the Germans occupied the area in July 1941, they exhumed the remains of over 9,000 people executed by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s and attempted to use this as propaganda to portray the evils of Soviet rule of the region; the deliberate blurring of the distinction between 'Jewish' and 'Bolshevik' permitted this to be used to incite hatred of the Jews, who were subjected to repeated purges, largely carried out by the SS *Einsatzgruppe C* ('Task Force C'). It is estimated that between 28,000 and 35,000 people were killed.[31] An infamous photograph was found by Soviet soldiers in an album belonging to a German soldier when they took the city; it shows a Jewish man kneeling at the edge of a mass grave while a member of the SS stands next to him, pointing a pistol at his head. The back of the photograph bears the caption 'The last Jew of Vinnitsa'. The Soviet soldiers uncovered similar atrocities in Uman, where civilians informed them that over 10,000 Ukrainians had been taken away as forced labour. Few of them would ever return to their homes. After suffering from mass executions at the hands of the NKVD and then the SS, the region now endured a fresh cycle of repression as the returning Soviet authorities rounded up those suspected of having collaborated – even to a modest degree – with the Germans. Some of those who were arrested were executed, often after very little legal process, while others were sent to labour camps in Siberia. Like those sent west by the Germans, few returned to their homes. In the accounts of the great battles that swept back and forth across the Eastern Front, the effect of the fighting and repeated atrocities like those described above on the ordinary population is often forgotten, but the suffering of the people of Vinnitsa at the hands of both sides is typical of what took place across the entire region.

Despite its losses, the German Army Group South still possessed considerable strength and Manstein did what he could to stop the Soviet assault. While 14th Panzer Division took up positions to conduct a fighting withdrawal towards the south and the Southern Bug crossings at Pervomaisk, plans were drawn up to use III and XLVIII Panzer Corps to counterattack against Zhukov's advance. The latter was under the command of General Hermann Balck, an aggressive and experienced panzer commander. He had commanded 11th Panzer Division during the fighting outside the Stalingrad encirclement before serving briefly as commander of *Grossdeutschland*; after a short spell in Italy he returned to the Eastern Front in the autumn of 1943 and was assigned command of XLVIII Panzer Corps, leading it to a partial victory west of Kiev that saw the German line stabilised briefly and Zhitomir recaptured – again, only briefly. He was held in high regard by Hitler, though some of his fellow officers regarded him as vain and over-confident. During the desperate battles around the Korsun encirclement, he led his divisions in battles to the north of Lutsk, blunting several Soviet attempts to push on to the west. He was confident that he would be able to drive the Red Army back over the Styr River 'in three or four days' when he was ordered to move his headquarters, together with 7th Panzer Division, to the Tarnopol sector.[32]

When it moved south with Balck, 7th Panzer Division was led by General Karl Mauss, who had commanded a panzergrenadier regiment in 4th Panzer Division with distinction. Together with *LSSAH*, the division was dispatched to secure the road running east from the city; Balck wrote that his headquarters was ordered to a location in the town of Zbarazh, a little to the north of Tarnopol, but he decided that Tarnopol itself would be a safer location. His staff left Zbarazh even as Soviet tanks entered the town from the north. In Tarnopol, Balck found three armoured trains and the usual chaos of rear area units, civilian bodies, and improvised battlegroups. He set to work with characteristic decisiveness:

> Fourth Panzer Army ordered all available units into Tarnopol, restricting their use purely to the defence of the city itself. But that was an error that could only lead to the loss of the city. I relieved the Tarnopol commandant and assigned Major

> Johannes Erasmus, my corps Ia [chief of operations], the armoured trains, an engineer battalion, and some assault guns. I then ordered him to delay the enemy as far north of Tarnopol as possible. For two days, Erasmus fought an intense and skilful battle near Zbarazh against the leading elements of the Russian VI Guards Tank Corps. Erasmus was awarded the Knight's Cross for the extra time that he bought us, and the deep mud also helped us to foil the Russians' plans … On the evening of 8 March, in keeping with our normal operating procedures, we moved the corps command post from Tarnopol to a village south of the city.[33]

As its units struggled to reach their new area of operations, 7th Panzer Division was ordered to mount counterattacks along the Tarnopol-Proskurov road. In addition to 7th Panzer Division and *LSSAH*, Balck had a battalion of Tiger tanks available to him, and these were now placed at the disposal of 7th Panzer Division. Accompanied by these valuable reinforcements, the division moved east from Tarnopol, through the town of Podwolosczyska, and tried to continue along the Proskurov road. Despite initial successes, Mauss' troops found themselves at increasing risk of being bypassed both to the east and west and thus threatened with encirclement. *LSSAH* was deployed to the east of 7th Panzer Division and contact between the divisions was ruptured by Soviet attacks on 10 March. Warmer weather brought inevitably muddy conditions, reducing the mobility of both sides, but Soviet tanks began to penetrate into Tarnopol on the same day. Driven south from the Tarnopol-Proskurov road with both of its flanks in the air, 7th Panzer Division endured some difficult moments before the Soviet pressure began to ease. On 14 March, Mauss received some welcome news, as he later recorded:

> The signals officer reported to me that a radio operator had intercepted a signal from the Russian commander of 39th Mechanised Brigade. The Russian requested fuel, ammunition and food supplies from his superiors. Most of the ammunition had been used up and fuel was running out.[34]

The Red Army was operating at the end of very long supply lines, and the deteriorating ground conditions added to their difficulties. Immediately, Mauss ordered a battlegroup to attack the town of Skalat in order to take advantage of the Soviet weakness. The town was soon captured, and in a follow-up attack 7th Panzer Division surprised and drove back elements of the Soviet 17th Mechanised Brigade, which was attempting to move forward to support 39th Mechanised Brigade.

Meanwhile, on the west flank of First Panzer Army, the last three Pz.IVs of 6th Panzer Division provided a rearguard as Staro Konstantinovka was abandoned. The units pulling out to the south continued along the congested, muddy road to Proskurov past abandoned vehicles and equipment, often forced to stop for prolonged periods. Soviet aircraft appeared whenever the weather allowed, making long strafing runs along the road; German soldiers took cover wherever they could during such attacks, cursing the absence of any friendly air cover. The *SS-Das Reich* battlegroup finally struggled through to Proskurov, only to find that here too the roads were choked with traffic. Impatiently, the soldiers of the SS division forced their way through the congestion in order to take up positions for an attack towards the west. With little or no information about the location of enemy forces, the battlegroup probed forward and soon ran into a Soviet defensive position. There was a short, sharp engagement; Hauptsturmführer Alfred Lex, the battlegroup commander and effectively the commander of what remained of the division in the front line, was killed. To the north, *Gruppe Bäke* continued to operate independently, some distance from the rest of the forces that had retreated from Staro Konstantinovka; it effectively acted as a shield, preventing the Red Army from promoting an energetic pursuit. It was just as well, as many German units were in a gravely weakened state – on 12 March, 6th Panzer Division reported that its four panzergrenadier battalions had between 87 and 220 men each, with a total division combat strength of less than 1,000 men.[35]

Despite the local successes of Balck's corps, the position of Fourth Panzer Army remained perilous. The operations to the north of Tarnopol and Proskurov had relieved the pressure on the right wing of the army, but there remained the yawning gap to First Panzer Army, and the left wing of Fourth Panzer Army was threatened with envelopment at Brody. From his headquarters, Raus, the army commander, contacted Balck and ordered him to attack north of Tarnopol in order to try to restore continuity to the front line, but losses continued to mount, sometimes in unexpected ways. The operations officer of *LSSAH*, Hauptsturmführer Max Vögtel, was killed on 13 March in a surprise partisan attack. By the end of the day, the combat strength of the division was reported to be just 1,229 officers and men.[36]

While Balck attempted to restore the situation from the west, First Panzer Army once more attempted to thrust into the eastern flank of the Soviet breakthrough. With only 12 tanks, 19th Panzer Division and the *SS-Das Reich* battlegroup moved northwest from Proskurov, easily driving off the few Soviet units in the area, but the main attack was made a little further south. On

16 March, *Gruppe Bäke* tried to advance along the main road from Proskurov to Tarnopol with the intention of linking up with *LSSAH*. The first objective was the village of Klimkowsky, which was captured with ease. Leaving three *Hornisse* tank hunters – later renamed the *Nashorn*, a lightly armoured vehicle based on the chassis of the Pz.III with a long-barrelled 88mm gun – and a damaged Pz.IV to hold the village, Bäke continued to the west. On the second day of the attack, leading elements encountered a patrol from *LSSAH* near Widawa, but almost immediately the battlegroup ran into Soviet armour. In the pre-dawn light, a battle broke out at short range, and the Germans claimed the destruction of 15 Soviet tanks, two assault guns, and numerous field guns and anti-tank guns.[37] However, there was growing pressure on the German defences around Proskurov with fresh Soviet attacks from the north. Hitler's declaration of the town as a fortress made little difference to the reality on the ground: First Panzer Army was already aware of the importance of holding the town as a major crossing point over the Southern Bug, and the closest major town to the front held by Fourth Panzer Army to the west.

After being reinforced by a small number of Tiger tanks, Bäke attempted to advance once more. The next objective was a wooded ridge that ran from north to south, and this proved to be strongly defended. Taking advantage of a sudden snow flurry that reduced visibility to just a few metres, the Germans managed to penetrate into the village of Dselintsche, and by the end of the day the total of enemy vehicles destroyed by *Gruppe Bäke* had risen to a claimed 44 tanks and 12 assault guns, but this was at a heavy price, as a member of the battlegroup later described:

> One of our assault guns was left ablaze. After successfully dealing with flanking fire, the commander ordered an attack on the edge of the woodland. The enemy infantry fled from their positions and it seemed as if it would be possible to break through the woodland at the first attempt.
>
> The Tigers were at the spearhead, echeloned to the left, the Panthers and assault guns protecting the right flank, and the armoured group approached to within 700m of the woodland where it ran into heavy anti-tank and tank fire. Six heavy anti-tank guns were identified along the edge of the wood and at least as many tanks and assault guns. Despite the fire of all our guns and a well-directed strike by our artillery battalion, it was not possible to advance over the last hill. Four anti-tank guns and four enemy tanks were shot up, but four Tigers and three Panthers were knocked out on our side, with two Panthers left ablaze. As we later discovered, the enemy had established their *Pakfront* at the edge of

> the woodland purely as a screen. Four heavy anti-tank guns were well-positioned on the back slope of the hill on which our tanks were standing and were able to bring the attack to a halt. It wasn't possible to sustain the attack with the remaining battle-worthy tanks. The half-tracks couldn't move forward because of heavy artillery fire.
>
> The commander of 11th Panzer Regiment [Bäke] then tried to lead the spearhead to the right of the woodland. But this proved impossible, as the ground was swampy. The enemy units seemed fairly confused. A column of vehicles about 1km long was advancing along the main road towards Tcherny-Ostrow. It was successfully engaged with artillery fire.
>
> As it was growing dark, the commander ordered a withdrawal to the start line. Here the armoured group came under further fire from the north and west. Return fire was barely possible as the tanks were almost out of ammunition.[38]

While Army Group South's position grew ever more critical, Manstein was summoned once more to a meeting with Hitler in Obersalzburg. In an attempt to improve the growing tension between the Führer and the army, Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of German forces in the west, presented Hitler with a declaration of loyalty signed by all field marshals. Manstein used the opportunity to make proposals for further operations: with the agreement of Kleist, commander of Army Group A, he suggested that Sixth Army should be pulled back further west to the Dniester, and forces released by this shortening of the front could be transferred to the neighbouring Eighth Army, which could reinforce its western flank and try to retain contact with First Panzer Army. At the same time, Army Group A would take responsibility for the defence of the Romanian frontier, with Romanian troops being assigned to it, but in order to restore the northern flank of the army group and establish contact with Army Group Centre, reinforcements were urgently needed. To that end, Manstein suggested that German forces in Hungary, together with Hungarian troops, should be sent to the front line.

The political situation in Hungary had deteriorated badly. As an ally of Germany, the Hungarian government had sent troops into the Soviet Union in 1941, where they soon became involved in German occupation policies. Hungarian Jews were forcibly transported to the city of Kamanets-Podolski, and in late 1941 Hungarian personnel assisted German and Ukrainian troops and paramilitary units in a massacre that resulted in the killing of over 26,000 of these Jews. The Hungarian Second Army was one of several formations from Germany's allies that were sent to hold the Don front in 1942 and its weakness, particularly in terms of anti-tank weapons, was ruthlessly exposed in the Soviet offensive that followed the Stalingrad encirclement. By early 1943, almost all Hungarian troops had been withdrawn from the front line. The Hungarian premier, Miklós Horthy, instructed Prime Minster Miklós Kállay to open secret negotiations with British and American contacts in an attempt to extract his country from what was increasingly perceived as a disastrous war, but the Germans soon became aware of these discussions. Alarmed that he might lose access to Hungarian oilfields – though limited, these still represented a substantial asset for Germany – and the possible 'domino effect' on other allies, Hitler ordered the Wehrmacht to take control of Hungary. Horthy was invited to Salzburg for talks on 15 March, and during his absence German troops executed Operation *Margarethe*, a bloodless seizure of control. When he returned to Budapest, Horthy was informed that unless he accepted the presence of German troops and sacked Kállay, replacing him with someone more favourable to Germany, the occupation would be no different from the occupation of France, Denmark and other nations; rather than risk this, Horthy complied. Manstein was aware of the presence of German troops in nearby Hungary and desperately needed them to shore up his front line, but Hitler refused to consider their transfer to Army Group South. Control of Hungary was too important. The only concession that Manstein was able to secure was that Hungarian troops would be deployed to protect the Carpathian passes.

During Manstein's brief absence, the situation in Galicia continued to deteriorate. *SS-Das Reich* found itself briefly cut off and had to fight its way back to safety on 21 March. After its recent battles, *Gruppe Bäke* was reduced to just two Tigers, two Panthers, four assault guns, four Pz.IVs and ten half-tracks. With constant Soviet pressure on his northern flank, Bäke had to turn his attention to the north rather than continue trying to reach *LSSAH*, which in any event came under heavy attack and was driven back. Widawa fell to the Soviet assault, sundering the tenuous link that had been established with *Gruppe Bäke*; short of fuel and ammunition, the SS unit could do little to impede the enemy. The Soviet forces that had already passed to the south continued to drive on, both to the south and into the deep western flank of First Panzer Army. Leading elements rolled through Husyatin and Czortków, with small groups of T-34s roaming further to the southeast and disrupting German traffic between Kamanets-Podolski, where Hube's First Panzer Army headquarters was located, and Gorodok. Having been extracted from the fighting north of Proskurov, 1st Panzer Division struggled along muddy, congested roads to Gorodok, arriving in time to prevent the town from falling to the Red Army, but both flanks of the division were precariously exposed, with no contact with other German units. Nor were there any German forces in the path of the Soviet units that had already pushed on to the south.

Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army had continued to advance on the eastern flank of First Panzer Army. The next barrier in its path was the Southern Bug, and Konev ordered his leading units to force crossings as fast as possible without waiting for bridging equipment. On 11 March, the first bridgeheads were secured across the river, followed shortly after by the capture of Dzhulynka and Haivoron. Importantly, a substantial bridge was captured intact at Kashchuvate; Luftwaffe attacks badly damaged the bridge on 12 March, but sufficient troops, equipment and most importantly fuel had already crossed for the advance to continue while engineers repaired the bridge and constructed a temporary ferry.[39] Meeting little or no resistance, the Soviet units pressed on to the west; the advance was increasingly taking on the character of a rout, as Konev later described:

> The swiftness and powerful pressure exerted by my Front's troops forced the enemy to retreat beyond the Southern Bug, and in some cases this retreat was very disorderly. The Nazis abandoned military equipment, artillery, tanks, cars, and buses. The road between Uman and the crossing at Dzhulynka – the main road along which our Second Tank Army advanced – was completely blocked by abandoned military equipment and weapons. When I drove through the area, I was personally convinced that the enemy had fled, abandoning everything. Indeed, the locals described them as leaving 'in their underpants'.[40]

Despite this evidence of chaos, Konev discovered from personal experience that the Germans remained dangerous foes when he drove to the Southern Bug from his headquarters:

> We drove slowly through the mud in first gear, at no more than 3–4km/h. We reached the river at dusk. The darkness and mud forced us to abandon blackout precautions and turn on our headlights. About 3km from the crossing, we were caught in an enemy air raid. My group consisted of four vehicles. Ahead of me was a jeep with an adjutant, then my vehicle. I sat in the front seat next to the driver … a Dodge car followed, and then a half-track. Struggling through the mud and deep ruts left by the tanks we remained in first gear. The roar of our engines drowned out everything and we didn't hear the noise of the aircraft. Suddenly, everything in an area of 50–100m around our vehicles was lit up by

> flames, and the air was full of the whistle of bombs and shrapnel. I ordered the driver to turn off the headlights, but the jeep in front stopped and blocked the road. We drove past, and the lights came on again with a jolt and the driver couldn't turn them off for a minute or two. We heard a second wave of aircraft and a new series of bombs fell near our vehicles. Finally, the headlights went out. All four vehicles had stopped. The aircraft were invisible in the night sky. After inspecting the car, we saw that mine had its windscreen shattered by small fragments.
>
> In the roof too there were several holes, one of considerable size. On the stuff in the back was a large bomb fragment weighing about 500g, which had hit a pillow and blanket and lodged there. A pillow and a blanket saved me from a shard that could have hit my spine.[41]

Whilst his northern wing was making rapid progress, Konev was less satisfied with his southern wing. On 15 March, he urged the commanders of Fifth and Seventh Guards Armies to make faster progress:

> The pursuit of the enemy by your armies is slow. Be aware that the enemy is fleeing. Our Front's troops are already fighting for Vapnyarka [70 miles (111km) west of Uman]. Your leadership of the left wing of the Front is delaying it up to 200km [120 miles] behind the right wing. The main reasons for the slow pursuit are firstly that the troops are spread evenly across the whole front line and are combing out the terrain. There is no courageous thrust to block the enemy's withdrawal. There is no concentration to destroy the enemy's resistance along the main axes. In this regard, you give the enemy freedom to redeploy his manpower and equipment. Secondly, headquarters of armies, corps and divisions has become separated from the troops and lags to the rear. Troops always require firm control. Strong management ensures a high tempo and the troops perform wonders …
>
> Create concentrations and mobile detachments on the main axes for a bold thrust into the enemy's rear, with the intention of denying them cover, cutting their lines of escape, and destroying their manpower and equipment … The main thing is to smash deeper into the enemy's positions along the main axes.[42]

In his memoirs, Konev acknowledged that the two armies singled out for criticism lacked large tank formations, making the successful execution of such orders far more difficult. Nevertheless, the rate of advance improved, though the Red Army, like the Wehrmacht, struggled with muddy conditions. Local civilians were recruited – with little choice on their part – to help extract vehicles from the mud, and on 17 March the leading tank units reached the Dniester at Yampil. Through the following two days, elements of Twenty-Seventh Army and Sixth Tank Army reached the river, but the Germans succeeded in destroying the bridge at Mogilev-Podolski (now known as Mohyliv-Podilskyi). Using improvised ferries, the Soviet troops began to cross while engineers laboured to complete a 272m bridge at Mogilev-Podolski. Swelled by the melting snow of the region and from the Carpathians, the Dniester was a formidable obstacle and many of the rafts used by the Soviet soldiers were washed away; nevertheless, sufficient personnel managed to cross in order to secure bridgeheads, which they held successfully until bridges were completed. By 21 March, Soviet troops had penetrated up to 24 miles (40km) beyond the river.

The Red Army units in Zhukov's 1st Ukrainian Front were not far away. Katukov's First Guards Tank Army reached the Dniester on 23 March and small groups of men crossed the river in improvised boats. As they arrived at the river, the Soviet soldiers of 20th Guards Mechanised Brigade enjoyed a moment of good fortune:

> The scouts found a wide ford through which tanks could try to cross. However, it was still impossible to organise systematic crossing of the army; the bridging column that was attached to the army had fallen behind. And without a pontoon bridge or ferries we couldn't ship wheeled vehicles and artillery to the opposite riverbank.
>
> At night, Sobolev [commander of the mechanised brigade] came to the hut where I was staying. 'Comrade Commander,' he said urgently, 'there is a German bridging column not far away in a village. But the village is held by the Nazis.'
>
> 'Where did you get this information?' I asked.
>
> 'Locals told us, and my scouts have confirmed it. We could capture it.'
>
> 'Good idea, but how to do it?'
>
> 'What if I send Captain Podgorbunsky? He's a great master of such matters. Nobody is as good as him.'
>
> … We met Podgorbunsky on the Dniester bank. I briefly explained to him the essence of the matter, and in a friendly manner, without making it an explicit order, asked, 'Comrade Podgorbunsky, would you be kind enough to capture the German bridging column? It would be a great service and will be remembered for a hundred years.'
>
> 'Easy, we'll do it.' I saw his eyes light up …
>
> That same night, Podgorbunsky and his company set off on their mission. As I later learned, he acted boldly but with prudence. In order to avoid getting lost

> he took as a guide one of the locals, who of course sympathised with us and rejoiced at the arrival of Soviet troops …
>
> In the middle of the night, Podgorbunsky and his scouts made their way through the enemy's outposts, entered the village where the bridging column was located, and fell on the small Fascist garrison like a storm. Apart from the bridging troops, there was nobody else in the village. Blasted by our machine-guns, the Nazis fled and, without wasting a second, our men dragged the pontoons to the Dniester, to the village of Ustechko.[43]

A bridge was soon assembled, allowing Katukov's army to cross in strength. Without pausing, the Soviet armour moved on to the south, reaching and capturing Chernivtsi on the Prut River. At the same time, other units turned east. Late on 23 March, they encountered the leading elements of Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front. Hube's First Panzer Army was encircled.

CHAPTER 7

MALINOVSKY'S OFFENSIVE

The advance by 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts created huge difficulties for the Wehrmacht, and as has been described, the gaps torn in the battlefront on either flank of First Panzer Army resulted in its isolation and the creation of a tenuous encirclement. But in addition to linking up with 1st Ukrainian Front, Konev's troops also had the opportunity to exploit the breach they created by striking against the northern flank of Eighth Army. To make matters worse for the Germans, the other flank of Eighth Army was also soon in danger.

Malinovsky's Third Ukrainian Front had also prepared its forces to join the offensive, and like all soldiers in Ukraine in early 1944, even when the enemy was quiet, its personnel struggled against the conditions. With all the available tank armies assigned to 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts, Malinovsky had to make the best of his resources for exploitation of any penetration and he and *Stavka* came up with a new solution to the constant problem of tank forces outstripping their infantry support. Improvising with the formations available, Malinovsky created a 'Horse and Mechanised Group' consisting of IV Guards Cavalry Corps and IV Guards Mechanised Corps. It was under the command of Lieutenant General Issa Aleksandrovich Pliev, and he later described the difficulties faced by his men:

> On the afternoon of 2 March, the weather warmed suddenly and rainy spring flooding followed. The roads were thoroughly swamped – it was impossible to move either on foot or in vehicles. In order somehow to improve traffic flow, engineers deepened the roadside ditches and made drains for the mud. Specially equipped tractors raked mud from the road into open pits and ditches. The sappers of each division were sent to the worst points. They carried rubble, sand,

> brushwood – anything that came to hand. They worked day and night. When the divisions moved forward towards the Ingulets River, it became clear that it was necessary to get past this area of viscous mud even before we could break through the enemy's defensive line. The thought arose: in these conditions, what would conditions be like in the enemy's rear? Would the tactical mobility of the troops be seriously impaired? And would enemy aircraft exploit this [i.e. attack the relatively immobile Soviet forces]?[1]

Vasilevsky and Pliev had earlier discussed the chances of success of a deep raid by a group of Soviet cavalry in such conditions, and had concluded that there were good prospects, as their horses would allow the Soviet troops to remain more mobile than their enemies. The main threat would come from German air attacks, and in order to mitigate this, the Horse and Mechanised Group was assigned additional anti-aircraft support. These guns would also improve the efficacy of the corps in combat against German armour.

At the beginning of March, the Soviet Eighth Guards Army, commanded by Colonel-General Vasiliy Ivanovich Chuikov, was ordered to secure a bridgehead across the Ingulets near Shyroke, about 12 miles (20km) south of Krivoy Rog. The German line here was held by the depleted units of 16th Panzergrenadier Division. Under its previous name – 16th Motorised Infantry Division – the division had achieved the distinction of being the German unit to penetrate furthest to the east when its reconnaissance battalion approached the outskirts of Astrakhan in the autumn of 1942. It fought almost alone in the yawning gap between the German forces in and around Stalingrad and those in the Caucasus during the following winter and in early 1943, when the spring thaw brought an end to Manstein's counteroffensive that restored the front line, it was briefly pulled out of line for some desperately needed rest and replenishment. As the Battle of Kursk drew to a close in July 1943, 16th Panzergrenadier Division returned to the front line and was then constantly involved in the retreat from the Mius to the Dnepr, suffering heavy losses with little chance to catch its breath. The officers of the division must have been dismayed when a signal arrived from higher commands in January 1944, following local setbacks:

> The corps command has received the following order from the supreme commander [Hitler]:
>
> From the quick and deep penetration by the enemy of the front of 16th Panzergrenadier Division, I conclude that some officers of the division have lost their combat capability. I demand a thorough investigation and punishment of

> the guilty, both of the commanders and their deputies, with the utmost severity of the military tribunal as the situation requires. Inform me immediately of the measures taken.[2]

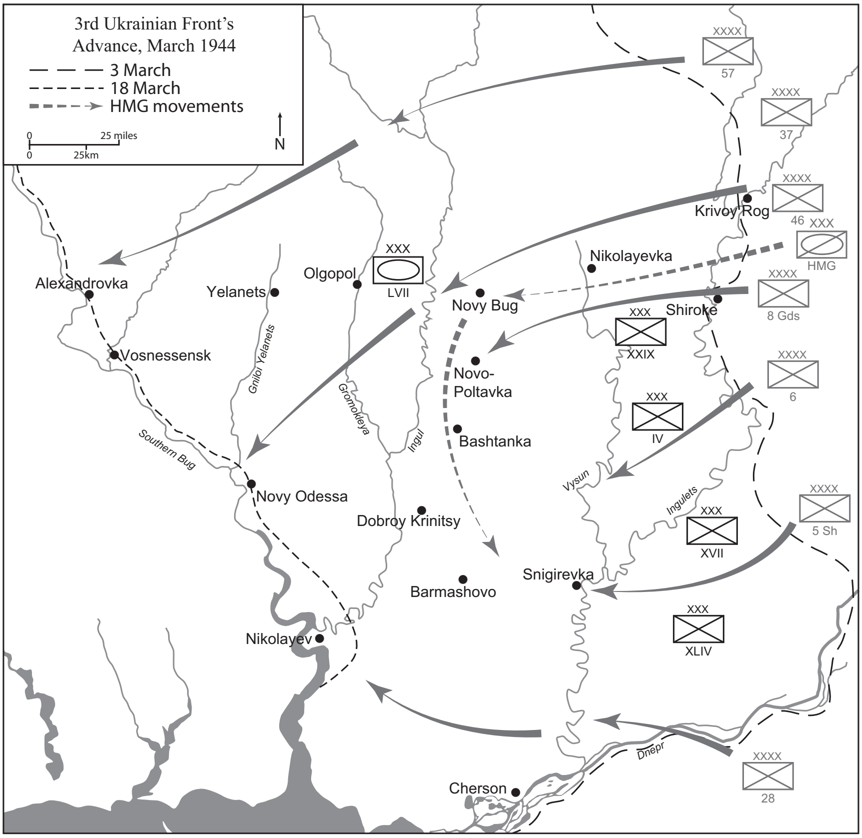
In reply, Generalleutnant Gerhard Graf von Schwerin, commander of the division, submitted a report that made clear the simple fact that his division was at the end of its strength:

> In addition to the report submitted on 19 January 1944, I add the following:
>
> As mentioned in the official reports of the High Command, the division paid a heavy price during the constant uninterrupted defensive battles of the past summer on the Mius, Donets, and in the Zaporozhye bridgehead. In these battles, total casualties came to 19,411 men, i.e. based upon establishment strength of its infantry, it was destroyed three times over.
>
> Despite this, by using its reserves and by replenishment, the division was able to maintain its combat capability. However, after the battle for Zaporozhye, the firepower and combat capability of the division, particularly the infantry, could not be restored. We have exhausted our reserves.
>
> During this period, i.e. from 10 October 1943, the division has been fighting in the region southwest of Dnepropetrovsk without any rest. From 10 October 1943 to 14 January 1944, it lost a further 5,120 men killed, wounded, missing or sick.
>
> … The division is bled white. However painful it may be to recognise it, the value of its infantry has fallen below the generally accepted standard of current infantry units.[3]

Just a few weeks before, Schwerin had written a personal letter to Hitler, asking him to pull 16th Panzergrenadier Division out of the front line, rebuild its units, and then perhaps deploy it elsewhere. The response to his latest – perfectly accurate – report was that he was relieved of his command. Generalmajor Günther von Manteuffel – another scion of the military family that could trace its roots to the Livonian Knights who had ruled large parts of what is now Latvia and Lithuania – was appointed in his place. Fortunately for Schwerin, his fall from favour was brief. When the remnants of 16th Panzergrenadier Division were re-formed later in 1944 as 116th Panzer Division, he was once more in command.

Perhaps acting on the assumption that the muddy conditions would prevent a major Soviet assault, the Germans were taken by surprise by Chuikov's attack to secure a bridgehead. As soon as they had secured the lodgement, the men of Eighth Guards Army worked industriously to build up their forces on the west bank. The tired soldiers of 24th Panzer Division, who might have hoped for a period of rest while they recovered their strength after their disastrous wasted journey to the Korsun encirclement and the fighting near Apostolovo, were told that they would be required to launch a counterattack to try to restore the front line. Even as they prepared to attack the bridgehead on 5 March, Malinovsky's Front began its advance towards the west.

Almost immediately, the Soviet attack – targeted once more at the seam between two major German formations – created a dangerous gap, with elements of Eighth Army withdrawing towards the northwest while Sixth


3rd Ukrainian Front's Advance, March 1944
3 March
18 March
HMG movements
0
25 miles
0
25km
N
XXXX
57
XXXX
37
XXXX
46
Krivoy Rog
XXX
HMG
Nikolayevka
XXXX
8 Gds
Shiroke
XXX
XXIX
XXXX
6
XXX
IV
XXXX
5 Sh
XXX
XVII
XXX
XLIV
XXXX
28
Alexandrovka
Yelanets
Olgopol
XXX
LVII
Novy Bug
Vosnessensk
Novo-Poltavka
Bashtanka
Gniloi Yelanets
Gromokleya
Ingul
Southern Bug
Vysun
Ingulets
Novy Odessa
Dobroy Krinitsy
Snigirevka
Barmashovo
Nikolayev
Cherson
Dnepr

Army recoiled to the southwest. The depleted battalions of 16th Panzergrenadier Division – none of which were at even 50 per cent of their establishment strength – were rapidly scattered by the Soviet thrust. The nearby 24th Panzer Division could do little to help as the Red Army prepared to exploit its success. Chuikov was keen to deploy the Horse and Mechanised Group as quickly as possible. In agreement with Malinovsky, his intention was to direct Pliev's group towards Novy Bug; in addition, the only other substantial armoured force available to 3rd Ukrainian Front – XXIII Tank Corps – was ordered to deploy on the northern flank of Eighth Guards Army. Either of these exploitation groups had more tanks than the combined strength of the German divisions in the sector, and the deployment of both at the same time was certain to stretch German resources to breaking point.

Pliev's Horse and Mechanised Group crossed the Ingulets a little to the north of the bridgehead from where Chuikov's army had broken out towards the west. Crossing the river proved to be difficult. Pliev had intended to use a captured German bridging column to build a crossing:

> Predictably, not all elements of the captured pontoon column arrived. With great difficulty, vehicles with essential communications equipment were pulled forward by the tanks. Lieutenant General [Trofim Ivanovich] Tanaschishin [commander of IV Guards Mechanised Corps] reported that in addition to a ford, his men had discovered a submerged dam that was only half a metre below the surface. It was possible to drive across it. All three brigades (one tank and two mechanised) had concentrated at the crossing point. The remaining brigades [i.e. those of IV Guards Cavalry Corps] were moving up about 4km to the north, near the village of Zelenoye.
>
> 'Don't wait until all units have arrived, start the crossing,' I ordered.
>
> 'The signal has already been given,' replied Tanaschishin, and turning to the commander of the tank brigade, added, 'Get on with it!'
>
> We drove along the column to the crossing point. The bank here was very steep and high. The sappers created an approach down the bank to the ford. The first tank, raising its gun high, descended to the shore and, as it entered the water, pivoted abruptly on the spot. Mud was churned up by its tracks. 'Not a stony bed, as we were told.'
>
> When the tank reached the middle of the river, one of the sapper officers said with relief, 'Well, that's great, we can count that as a successful crossing.'
>
> 'Don't tempt fate,' remarked General Tanaschishin. And fate was tempted! The tank stopped. Its engine roared and it shuddered but it couldn't move.

> A second tank was sent to its aid. It suffered the same fate. The first tank's gearbox failed. Mud was building up around the tanks – this threatened to become serious. A tanker got out of the upper hatch, took one end of the towing cable and jumped into the icy water. Ice floes knocked him down but he struggled until he attached the metal cable to the rowing ring of the stranded tank. Then he returned, climbed up to the turret and shouted, 'Let's go!'
>
> … When the cavalry corps reached the river the bridge was not yet ready. The head of engineering troops, our corps engineer and the commander of 9th Guards Cavalry Division were by the bridge … 'Why has work on the bridge stopped?' I asked the corps engineer.
>
> The Front's head of engineering troops replied on his behalf. 'It can't be done, Issa Alexandrovich, our calculations show that the accumulation of ice floes against the middle of the bridge will tear it away.'
>
> 'I assume there's a safety margin in your calculations?' I asked.
>
> 'We have approved standards and we must comply with them,' he answered. This experienced engineer, who had built more than a dozen bridges, many of them far more complex, was of course right, but we needed the bridge as otherwise the corps would not arrive in its designated concentration area on time. I insisted that the bridge be completed, and by the evening it was ready. I must add that it took incredible efforts to achieve this. The bridge seemed to be at breaking point, severely bent by the pressure of the stream. The sappers destroyed the largest ice floes with demolition charges and guided them under the bridge with boathooks. They struggled with all their might, and under constant attack by enemy aircraft. It was dangerous to cross this bridge, but by morning the main forces of the corps had passed through and were concentrated in Nikolayevka. The anti-tank and anti-aircraft regiments and a regiment of mortars were still wading through the mud en route to the crossings.[4]

The winter's disastrous march to the Korsun encirclement and subsequent return to the south had left 24th Panzer Division desperately short of wheeled vehicles. Many of its tanks and half-tracks were in need of repair, and the subsequent fighting to the west of the lower Dnepr took a further toll. Now, with almost no operational tanks, Edelsheim's division was ordered to attack towards the south in an attempt to block the Soviet thrust and restore contact with Sixth Army. Before any such attack could be attempted, the Red Army struck, driving 24th Panzer Division back to Nikolayevka. The troops were forced to destroy the large number of damaged and disabled vehicles that had accumulated, together with those that were incapable of remaining mobile in the muddy conditions. Much of the division's headquarters was forced to use horse-drawn wagons as, threatened by complete encirclement, a breakout to the west began, with combat elements having to secure the line of retreat whilst simultaneously holding off the Soviet forces attacking from the south, east and northeast:

> It was now vital that the battalion that remained in defensive positions had to pull out and break contact from the enemy without him being at all aware of it. At the same time, all officers and platoon commanders were familiarised with the terrain and the mission. Then, the men began to filter back through the village and assembled at a pre-ordained spot where they were hidden from the enemy and briefly received food and supplies. While food was being handed out a few mortar rounds landed in the middle of our assembly area, as a result of which we lost a few more trucks, though we didn't have significant casualties amongst the men. The battalion then set off, still unnoticed by the enemy … Shortly after, as we emerged from the shelter of the heights that shielded us from the enemy, we had to cross a small stream, no obstacle for the men marching on foot and the half-tracks, but a major one for the wheeled vehicles, many of which became stuck, particularly our kitchen wagons. Now the self-propelled anti-tank vehicles drew up to try to pull the wheeled vehicles out of the morass. Spotting these attempts, the Russians opened heavy fire on our right flank with machine-guns. One kitchen wagon went up in flames; the attempts to rescue the other vehicles had to be abandoned as the self-propelled guns were in danger of becoming bogged down and we couldn't afford to lose these valuable vehicles under any circumstances. Meanwhile the Russians had moved further west and threatened to attack us from the north. The battalion had crossed the stream and some elements were already far ahead. The commander of the half-tracks, who had been covering the towing attempt by firing the on-board machine-gun, had to drive on to stop the battalion from becoming scattered. But after just 500m the engine gave out.
>
> Rittmeiser von Langenn, Leutnant Laskowski and I bailed out. The driver and messenger were to try to get the engine going again. We had covered about 100m when I stopped and saw to my horror that the half-track was ablaze. The only radio available to the battalion was thus destroyed.[5]

The remaining mobile elements of the division's armoured reconnaissance battalion launched a desperate counterattack, which managed to bring the Soviet advance to a halt long enough for the retreating elements to pull back.

As his group advanced, Pliev and his staff stopped in a small village and had a surprising encounter with an enemy soldier:

> While the signallers were communicating with our other units, we entered a house next to the road. A kerosene lamp dimly lit the only room, in which there was a stove. In the corner, under some photographs on the wall, an old woman was praying, bowing to the images of the sad Virgin and Saint Nicholas. She begged us to save the peasant Matvey and his son Ivan from bullets and sabres, and to destroy the enemy rabble.
>
> 'Your menfolk will return, mother, don't worry,' the colonel reassured the old woman.
>
> … The old woman rushed around the hut, preparing to feed us 'whatever God has sent'. She grabbed a shovel and a bucket and hurried into the yard. 'Now, my sons, I will dig up some stored potatoes and cucumbers.' But suddenly, apparently remembering something, she opened a trapdoor to a cellar. 'Hey, Fritz, come, come.'
>
> To our surprise, a very young German soldier emerged from the cellar. He looked at us with wide, bright eyes, and they seemed to turn pale with fear. We thought that the old woman might have captured a formidable enemy in heroic combat, but the truth was rather different. Our hostess was in the courtyard when suddenly more than a dozen German soldiers and officers burst into the neighbouring house, dragged a [German] soldier out, and immediately shot him. At this moment, two other Germans ran across the road and hid in a barn. They were as shocked as her. Appalled by the execution, the woman returned to her hut and saw with horror that a German was standing in the middle of the room. He spoke urgently to her, pointing at his uniform, but seeing that she didn't understand, threw his gun at the oven and crawled under the bed. Seeing the danger to him the woman hid him in the cellar. A German mother somewhere should be grateful to the old Russian woman for the life of her son.
>
> Having handed over the rescued man to us, she hurried to prepare us a simple meal. This seemed the most important thing to her. We had other concerns.[6]

It is likely that the old woman had witnessed the activities of a German military police unit, which was meting out rough justice to suspected deserters and stragglers. Such incidents became increasingly common towards the end of the war; at first, they were limited to men who were clearly running away from combat, but as the war drew to a close, men who had been separated from their units through no fault of their own, or even those who had been verbally tasked with duties that took them elsewhere, fell victim to the military police.

Pliev's Horse and Mechanised Group was approaching Novy Bug and a scouting group was sent forward to assess the German forces in the area and, if possible, to seize prisoners for interrogation – known in the Red Army as 'tongues':

> Having slipped through the positions of the German 16th Panzergrenadier Division, the scouts captured two German motorcycles, took the greatcoats, helmets and guns from the Nazis who it appeared had no wish to remain in the land they had defiled, and rode to the Novy Bug railway station. It was well past midnight when the motorcyclists entered the village … There was nobody in the streets. They entered the waiting room [of the station]. A dozen lower ranks were sleeping, unaware of the danger looming over them. But the intelligence officers were more interested in the quality of 'tongues' than the quantity. They went on to the stationmaster's office where, they supposed, there would be a better choice. An officer was standing with his back to the door, shouting harshly into a handset. He was clearly issuing orders. The second man stood with a respectful attitude. The station chief, or perhaps it was his assistant, looked at the 'German' soldiers who had dared enter the office with confusion … Faced with the cold muzzles of pistol barrels, the officer was dumbfounded.
>
> 'Well, then they retraced their steps,' Captain Kozlov [who had dispatched the scouts] finished his story, 'they put him on a motorcycle and brought him back.'[7]

After interrogating the prisoner, Pliev decided to launch a rapid attack to capture Novy Bug before German reinforcements could arrive. In pouring rain, the Soviet troops moved forward late on 7 March and Pliev joined his Cossacks as they attacked the town the following day. After a brief but stiff fight, Novy Bug was in Soviet hands. Supplies were air-dropped to the Horse and Mechanised Group and Pliev and his command pushed on. On 11 March, the Soviet Thirty-Seventh Army reached Novy Bug, but the leading Soviet armour was already some considerable distance to the southwest, threatening to reach the Southern Bug crossings before the retreating Germans. A major battle now developed immediately to the south of Novy Bug where Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army captured the town of Novo-Poltavka. Here, the Red Army captured a number of German howitzers and a large supply of ammunition. German infantry to the south of the town had been badly outflanked by this advance and, threatened with encirclement, launched repeated counterattacks towards Novo-Poltavka. Chuikov's leading units were short of artillery ammunition due to the huge difficulties of moving supplies across the muddy terrain and possession of the guns and ammunition in Novo-Poltavka became critical. If the Germans were to recapture the guns, they would enjoy a temporary advantage in artillery and might be able to inflict sufficient damage on Eighth Guards Army to escape to the west, or even to bring the Soviet advance to a standstill. Chuikov travelled to the town on 12 March, taking personal command of the units on the spot – 39th and 79th Guards Rifle Divisions – and ordered them to deploy the captured artillery. Despite the fire from the howitzers, the Germans fought their way closer to Novy-Poltavka and Chuikov ordered a tank brigade from XXIII Tank Corps to drive them back. By the end of 13 March, the crisis was over and the Germans had been driven back in disarray. Chuikov claimed the destruction of six German infantry divisions and severe damage to four more, as well as to 24th Panzer Division, but all of the divisions he listed remained in the field, albeit reduced to weak battlegroups with few or no heavy weapons. Nevertheless, Hollidt's Sixth Army was in danger of isolation and destruction. In addition to the powerful attack that had torn a gap between its northern flank and Eighth Army to the north, its east-facing front was under constant attack by the Soviet Sixth and Fifth Shock Armies. All Hollidt could do was order his troops to pull back towards the Southern Bug in the hope that a stable line could be established there.

After capturing Novy Bug, the Soviet Horse and Mechanised Group turned south in an attempt to break into the rear of the German Sixth Army. There was heavy fighting at Bashtanka, where the Germans received valuable air support – flying from an airfield immediately to the south of the town, German ground attack aircraft repeatedly struck at Pliev's cavalry, benefiting from being able to land, rearm and fly to the combat zone in a short time. The first attempt to take Bashtanka was repulsed, but with the Soviet IV Guards Mechanised Corps outflanking the German positions to the west, there was little prospect of prolonged resistance. The next objective was the port of Nikolayev, close to the estuary of the Southern Bug. Capture of this city would effectively isolate the southern half of the German Sixth Army. Hollidt immediately ordered all available reserves – in reality, little more than a few weak battlegroups – to the area to stop Pliev's advance. A combination of supply difficulties and increasing German resistance forced the Horse and Mechanised Group to slow its advance. Nevertheless, on 10 March the small town of Dobroy Krinitsy, about 21 miles (35km) northeast of Nikolayev, was in Soviet hands. On many occasions, the

German soldiers on the Eastern Front complained about a lack of air support, but it was the Luftwaffe that saved the situation by subjecting Pliev's men to incessant attacks. The additional anti-aircraft assets that had been assigned to the Horse and Mechanised Group were still floundering far to the rear and for the moment, the exposed Soviet troops could do little but seek whatever cover was available. Despite his impatience to press on, Pliev had to await the onset of darkness before he could renew his advance. Aware that a successful push to the Southern Bug estuary would trap a sizeable part of the German Sixth Army, Malinovsky transferred control of XXIII Tank Corps to the Horse and Mechanised Group.

By drafting stragglers from other formations, the panzergrenadier battalions of 24th Panzer Division managed to achieve a strength of between 400 and 500 men, but morale was variable and there was little sense of unit cohesion, as large numbers of soldiers had no prior experience of serving under their current NCOs and officers. Without their vehicles and support weapons, these improvised battalions were little more than infantry, struggling through the muddy landscape towards the west, but this measure prevented the stragglers from being left behind, and provided at least a modicum of firepower for the German units. The priority, though, was purely to escape to the west. There was little prospect of being able to mount counterattacks of sufficient strength to make any difference to the Soviet advance. It was a humbling transformation to the division that had arrived on the Eastern Front in late 1943 and had fought with great distinction and success, first at Krivoy Rog and then in the Nikopol bridgehead.

Meanwhile, Pliev launched a fresh attack towards the south on 11 March. Anxious to penetrate as deep as he could into the rear of the German Sixth Army, he ordered IV Guards Mechanised Corps to bypass a strong German position at Yavkino and to press on towards Barmashovo. As they advanced, the Soviet units repeatedly clashed with German columns trying to withdraw to the west in order to reach the Southern Bug before they were cut off. German aircraft attacked the Soviet columns many times, once more showing the need for the additional anti-aircraft units that had been assigned to Pliev, and when the leading tanks approached their objective they were surprised to hear sounds of fighting ahead. The tanks immediately pressed forward and were greeted by partisans who had already taken control of the northern half of Barmashovo. Fighting continued all day with both sides anxious to force the issue. Hollidt had issued an order that it was of paramount importance for his troops to reach the Southern Bug and cross it to safety, and the Red Army had intercepted this signal. To the north of the thrust that had dislocated the German defences, General Friedrich Kirchner's

LVII Panzer Corps was ordered to try to attack towards the south to try to relieve the pressure on Hollidt's infantry. Such an operation was not without substantial risk – in addition to turning the northern flank of the German Sixth Army, Soviet units had pushed on west over the Ingul and Gromokleya Rivers and were thus threatening to envelop LVII Panzer Corps from the south. Nevertheless, it was hoped that the attack would regain and block the road running west from Novy Bug; this would prevent reinforcements and supplies reaching the Soviet armoured units further west and would buy precious time. The thrust was to be mounted by 23rd and 24th Panzer Divisions and two infantry divisions – in reality, all of these units had been reduced to little more than weak battlegroups by the losses of preceding weeks.

Through 12 March, the weary German troops laboured west across the Gromokleya and began to form up at Olgopol. The following morning, the attack began. There was insufficient artillery for more than a cursory preparatory bombardment, and although the attack gained some ground, it proved impossible to secure the road that had been the original objective. Casualties were heavy on both sides, with the result that 3rd Ukrainian Front had to divert aerial resources and supplies to Eighth Guards Army and Thirty-Seventh Army, thus reducing the support available to the Horse and Mechanised Group. With reports that some of the Soviet armour further west was now turning north and threatening to roll up the southern flank of Eighth Army, 24th Panzer Division began another exhausting withdrawal to the west. Many German accounts of fighting on the Eastern Front during this period concentrate on the endurance and heroism of the ordinary soldiers in the front line, but other accounts are perhaps more honest about the impact of constant retreats and casualties with no apparent prospect of victory:

> And when the long columns of the squadrons wound their way uphill through the snow and rain, wrapped up in coats and camouflage jackets, scrubby packhorses on lead reins, we were involuntarily reminded of scenes from 1812. Nothing seemed to have changed since then. No vehicles, no radios, no tanks, and no planes helped these men in these desperate hours. Only courage and self-sacrifice could ward off the worst. And there was growing bitterness at the manufacturers who seemed unable to construct vehicles that could cope with these conditions. Bitterness at the incompetence of the high command that, despite knowing about such conditions in the third Russian winter of the war, had not taken the necessary measures and hid behind the strategy of holding on at all costs. The cost was the destruction of entire armies![8]

Aware that Soviet troops were operating far to the west and southwest, Kirchner ordered his divisions to pull back west of the Gniloy Yelanets River. A battlegroup from 23rd Panzer Division secured a crossing near Olgopol while the rest of the corps passed through. A veteran of 24th Panzer Division later recalled:

> There now began the worst march of the entire retreat, driven by time and the enemy and hindered by the weather. Aside from a pause of one hour, we marched the entire night through the worst snowstorm I had ever experienced. The storm pelted our faces with mixed snow and hail, making it so painful after a short time that we had to turn our backs to it. The ground was so soft that we sank almost to our knees with every step. At dawn we at least had the good fortune to come across a horse. But due to the cold, it didn't last long. It was almost impossible to believe that we had to fight for every step, given that in the five or six hours before dawn we had still covered 20km [12 miles]. Horsemen had to ride up and down the column to stop completely exhausted men from simply lying down in the snow. Despite this, when we reached our objective about 30 stragglers were missing, and only some of them caught up with us later.
>
> After we reached the first rest point, an apparently substantial town, it was really grim. Everyone tried to find a warm place to sleep in the first intact house. But this wasn't permitted and the battalion had to remain together to ensure that nobody was left behind when we departed. At the edge of Olgopol we found somewhere to rest and everyone was asleep within five minutes. Shortly after noon, after we had eaten, we set off again to a village about 5km [three miles] away where the regiment headquarters was positioned. But our hopes were dashed. The regiment had already departed. So on we went, when would we catch up with them? One radio message followed another urging us to make haste. In any case, the Russians constantly threatened us, they were about six hours behind us …
>
> After a short rest in Priyut-Saakino … the march continued a further 20km [12 miles] to Yelanets, which we reached at midnight. Once again, it was a grim march. The weather was a bit better, but everyone was dropping with exhaustion and the roads were abysmal. We often had to cross small streams without bridges, and we simply waded across in our boots – if we were fortunate enough still to have them. It was easier to fight the enemy than struggle with the rain, mud and time pressure. These 20km seemed dreadfully far for us. The commander rode ahead and we soon thought we had been abandoned, and there were mutinous mutterings in the unit. When its leader, Leutnant Pauli, made matters worse by saying that we should have no sympathy with the grumbles, I decided it was appropriate to ask him if he believed that it showed sympathy to allow all the men

> to fall into the hands of the Russians, whereupon he rode away silently to his squadron. We fired flares from time to time, but neither the commander nor Yelanets appeared. After a while someone asked me if we should fire our last flare. I can't describe our joy when we saw by the light of the flare that we were 50m from the first houses of the village. Where we were to go next, nobody knew, as neither the commander nor his adjutant were with us. So we continued down the muddy main street. After calling out several times we came across a Rittmeister [cavalry rank equivalent to Hauptmann]; Leutnant Laskowski, who had been sent ahead to organise quarters for us, remained missing the entire night and the following day too.[9]

Undoubtedly, the incorporation of so many men from other units into the ranks of 24th Panzer Division had an adverse impact on morale, cohesion and discipline, but even the elite troops of this East Prussian formation were showing signs of strain.

Between Pliev's group and the Soviet infantry further north there was a gap of about 24 miles (40km), but Malinovsky and his subordinates were confident that there were no German forces capable of taking advantage of this to strike into the rear of the Horse and Mechanised Group. A bigger danger was that, as they retreated from the east, the infantry units of the German Sixth Army would pile up on the eastern flank of Pliev's group and put it under pressure. There were now conflicting pressures on the mechanised and cavalry units: they needed to protect their flank and rear; they had to be ready to intercept any retreating German infantry that might try to slip through to the west by taking a road behind Pliev's group; and there continued to be demands for them to press on and reach either Nikolayev or the Southern Bug estuary, thus completing the isolation of Sixth Army. Fuel and ammunition remained in short supply, and although Pliev had been given control of XXIII Tank Corps, its units were still en route. When he anxiously enquired about its expected time of arrival, he received bad news: the attack by the German LVII Panzer Corps further north had caused sufficient concern for XXIII Tank Corps to be handed back to Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army. Despite achieving only modest gains in terms of territory, Kirchner's attack had resulted in an important diversion of forces. There was some further bad news. German aircraft had attacked the columns of XXIII Tank Corps and the corps commander, Lieutenant General Efim Grigorevich Pushkin, had been killed by shrapnel from an explosion. As an interim measure, Chuikov sent Major General Matvei Grigorevich Vainrub, commander of Eighth Guards Army's tank and mechanised forces, to take command of the corps. And the delayed anti-aircraft units were still struggling to join the main force of the Horse and Mechanised Group.

After tough fighting, Pliev's troops secured a ridge facing east, still some distance to the northeast of Nikolayev, to block the path of some of the retreating German units. They were now facing the lower Ingulets; previously, they had crossed the river from east to west, but now they approached its lower reaches from the opposite direction. There were constant clashes with German columns attempting to break through to the Southern Bug valley to the west and a radio intercept suggested that Sixth Army would attempt to attack from the small town of Snigirevka, on the Ingulets, westwards to Nikolayev. Pliev deployed an anti-tank artillery regiment near Snigirevka and heavy fighting erupted on 14 March. Pliev's account describes dozens of German armoured vehicles left burning on the landscape, but it is unlikely that Sixth Army had such lavish assets available at this stage of the war. On 14 March, the Soviet XXXVII Rifle Corps – the leading element of Fifth Shock Army – made contact with Pliev's southern flank, having advanced from the east and thus having turned the southern flank of the German Sixth Army. Hollidt's troops were effectively surrounded.

As both sides had repeatedly learned during the fighting on the Eastern Front, it was one thing to bypass the flanks of an enemy formation and meet beyond them in an encirclement; it was quite another thing to ensure that the encirclement was continuous and there were no opportunities for the enemy to escape. Over the next few days, clashes continued in the area to the east of Nikolayev as various German units, ranging from small groups of soldiers to division-sized battlegroups, tried to slip through to the west. Whilst many were intercepted and scattered or destroyed by the Red Army, other groups succeeded in reaching the Southern Bug. Inevitably, almost all heavy equipment was lost during the retreat and all of the German divisions involved in the battle took heavy losses. The near-complete destruction of 16th Panzergrenadier Division resulted in its remnants being dispatched to France where they were ultimately re-formed as 116th Panzer Division; in addition, the Red Army claimed the destruction of 9th Panzer Division, but although this formation had been in the area earlier in the year, it had been transferred to southern France before the Soviet offensive broke and was in the process of being brought back to operational strength.

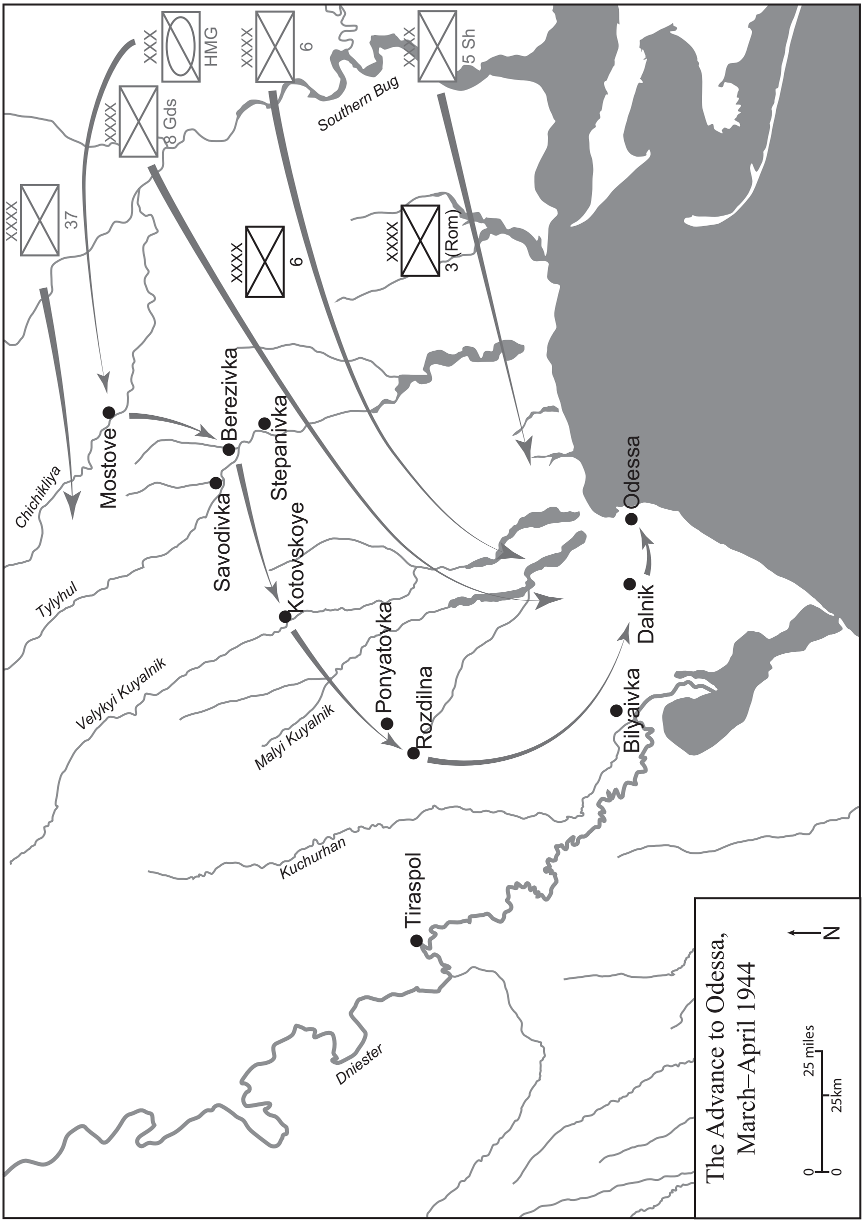
Pliev's Horse and Mechanised Group continued to receive the attention of German aircraft, operating at what seemed greater levels of activity; as they fell back, the Germans benefited from shorter supply lines, whereas Soviet aircraft were now operating at longer range. The Soviet squadrons that had been able to relocate to improvised airstrips nearer the front line were hamstrung by the same supply difficulties as those faced by ground troops. Pliev complained that had he had better air cover, his group would have achieved its objectives far more quickly. He described how a radio conversation with Tanaschishin, commander of IV Guards Mechanised Corps, was disrupted when the latter's radio vehicle was hit by a German air attack. Needing to discuss matters with Tanaschishin, Pliev dispatched a Po-2 biplane to collect him. In addition to harassment operations, these aircraft were often used for such liaison work because their lightweight construction and short runway requirements allowed them to function when heavier machines could not, and Pliev noted that this was the last plane available to him; it was promptly shot down by German fighters before it could reach Tanaschishin. When Lieutenant General Vladimir Aleksandrovich Sudets, commander of Seventeenth Air Army – which was responsible for air support for 3rd Ukrainian Front – visited Pliev's headquarters, he forestalled Pliev by acknowledging that air support had been inadequate, blaming the appalling conditions under which everyone was trying to operate. Sudets was accompanied by Vasilevsky, who greatly improved Pliev's mood by presenting him with the Order of Lenin.[10]

Malinovsky and Chuikov joined the meeting, and the latter was presented with the Hero of the Soviet Union award. Malinovsky outlined ongoing operations: in order to put further pressure upon the German Sixth Army, the Horse and Mechanised Group was to advance towards Odessa. Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army was to secure a breakthrough, after which Pliev's group would exploit towards the city. It would not be a straightforward task. The terrain between the Southern Bug and Dniester is strewn with gullies and waterways generally running towards the south, and there were very few paved roads running in the right direction to facilitate the advance. Pliev ordered that his tanks were to carry additional barrels of fuel, with boxes of ammunition strapped to their engine decks, in an attempt to prolong the time for which they would be able to sustain operations.

The attack began on 27 March. Whilst Eighth Guards Army made only slow progress, the neighbouring units to the northwest – Thirty-Seventh and Fifty-Seventh Armies – gained more ground, and Pliev was ordered to move his group to exploit their success. The initial result was a huge traffic jam the following morning as Pliev's men competed with units of Thirty-Seventh Army for crossings over the Southern Bug. To make matters worse, the first tank regiment to cross the pontoon bridge over the river damaged the crossing, leading to further delays. It was only late on 28 March that Pliev's units began to cross, taking until midday on the following day to assemble in full on the west bank. From here the leading formations were committed in an attack towards the west and southwest, with the intention of reaching and capturing Berezivka, a town a little under halfway between the Southern Bug crossings and Odessa, astride the Tylyhul River. The intention was for 10th Guards Cavalry Division to achieve this – an advance of about 36 miles (60km) – by the end of 30 March. Almost immediately, the difficult terrain posed problems. Not long after crossing the bridge over the Southern Bug, Pliev's troops reached the Chichikliya River, swollen by the spring thaw, at Mostove. The Germans had established a strongpoint here and fighting continued beyond sunset on 29 March, but some of Pliev's armour bypassed the German position and pushed on to Berezivka. The Tylyhul River in and around the town is dominated by high ground on the southwest bank and Pliev was unwilling to risk an assault during the night. Instead, he waited for dawn on 30 March, when it became clear that a crossing would be difficult to secure. Accordingly, Pliev ordered that an attempt to cross the river should be made at Zavodivka and Stepanivka, about three miles upstream and downstream respectively.

Once again, the Horse and Mechanised Group found itself operating without air cover and came under repeated attack as it attempted to deploy for the new attack. German artillery also bombarded the Soviet units, and Pliev's horse was killed under him. Worse news followed: Tanaschishin was fatally wounded by the German bombing of Berezivka. Major General Vladimir Ivanovich Zhdanov, chief of staff of XIII Tank Corps, was ordered to replace him as commander of IV Guards Mechanised Corps. Perhaps heartened by their air support, the German units on the high ground overlooking Berezivka attacked to eliminate numerous small Soviet bridgeheads within the town itself, and spotting this, Pliev ordered the units crossing the river on either side of Berezivka to attack the exposed flanks of the Germans. Caught between these attacks, the Germans pulled back, abandoning their dominating positions.

Pliev's troops rapidly crossed the Tylyhul River and prepared for their next advance. Once again, the Horse and Mechanised Group was faced by potentially difficult river crossings: between the Tylyhul and the city of Tiraspol, which lies on the northeast bank of the lower Dniester, about 65 miles (105km) to the west, were several streams running from north to south. The Velykyi Kuyalnik and Malyi Kuyalnik Rivers were the first obstacles, followed by the Kuchurhan River. A drive to the Dniester would threaten to cut off the German Army Group A before it could withdraw to the west, but also ran the risk of exposing the flanks of the Horse and Mechanised Group to counterattacks. The northern flank was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The Advance to Odessa, March–April 1944

the lesser concern, as the infantry armies of 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts were steadily closing off this area, but with the bulk of the German Eighth and Sixth Armies attempting to escape encirclement, there was a strong likelihood of the southern flank being threatened, and at some point Pliev would have to divert troops in that direction. To complicate matters still further, the Soviet commanders now learned that the water works in Odessa had been prepared for demolition by the Germans, which would leave the entire city without clean water. Capturing the water plant and removing the German demolition charges was added to Pliev's list of priorities.

The Germans were struggling to identify Pliev's group and were therefore unsure of its precise strength. As units were pulled out of positions further east, they were hurried west and deployed in a variety of positions to try to stop Army Group A – which was renamed Army Group South Ukraine on 5 April – from from being pinned to the coast. These units included 17th and 335th Infantry Divisions, both of which had been part of the German defences in the Nikopol bridgehead. Inevitably, their precipitate retreat had cost them much of their heavy equipment, but apart from a small number of Romanian units, they were the only recognised front-line formations available to stop the Soviet advance. There was heavy fighting as the Horse and Mechanised Group attempted to force crossings over the Velykyi Kuyalnik at Kotovskoye on 1 April, and concluding that it was too costly to drive the Germans off with a frontal attack, Pliev sent units to try to cross the river on either flank, as he had done at Berezivka. Despite having to endure German air attacks – there was still no Soviet fighter cover – both flanking operations made good progress, particularly after low cloud and snow flurries made further German dive-bomber attacks impossible.

Another of the German divisions that had fought in the Nikopol bridgehead, 3rd Mountain Division, had already endured an encirclement to the northeast of Nikopol. Although it succeeded in breaking out to the west, it was badly weakened in the process and was then ordered to proceed west as fast as possible to secure crossings over the lower Dniester, as part of an operation codenamed *Alphabet*. For men who had already marched on foot from Nikopol along roads that existed largely in name only, and had endured one crippling encirclement, this operation, which required a march of 180 miles (300km) in just 12 days, was a tough undertaking. One of its regiments was turned north to stop Pliev's group and ran into a cavalry division that had forced the Velykyi Kuyalnik south of Kotovskoye. At this stage, the German regiment was really little more than a battalion in terms of strength and was rapidly driven off. One of its officers was captured by Pliev's men and his dispiriting report must have been music to the ears of the Soviet soldiers, who it should be remembered were just as tired from their exertions:

> In some areas there is terrible confusion; panic reigns. Everything is mixed up. Many commanders, overwhelmed by fear, gave orders to destroy gasoline, food and ammunition stocks. For example, the commander of the supply company, Leutnant Lax, destroyed everything, setting it all ablaze. His men had already fled.[11]

Pliev urged his tired men forward towards the town of Rozdilna, even though German units that had been bypassed continued to stream across his rear area from time to time as they attempted to escape to the west. Late on 3 April, the weather turned cold again:

> A strong wind brought thick snow, blowing into our faces and blinding us. The Cossacks dismounted. They walked sideways, leaning forward, hardly able to move against the pressure of the wind and snow. They continued on foot, saving the strength of their horses for the attack on Rozdilna. We were using the last reserves of physical strength and willpower. Tanks, self-propelled guns, and other vehicles tried to struggle forward on impossible roads. They were pulled or pushed, timber boards and brushwood placed under their wheels and tracks – anything that could possibly be used, including padded jackets and overcoats. People were so extremely tired that their senses became blunted. Many became indifferent to danger.
>
> In such conditions, the unexpected happened. At midnight, an enemy cavalry column (several hundred horsemen and 50–60 vehicles with infantry and artillery) unwittingly joined our 127th Cavalry Regiment, which was the forward detachment of 30th Cavalry Division. The vanguard of 138th Cavalry Regiment, leading the division's main body, discovered them. Its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Zaborin, immediately deployed his leading tanks and cavalry and boldly attacked them from the rear. The reinforced 127th Regiment halted and also attacked …
>
> Before morning we had to fight again in the area of Ponyatovka, the last settlement before Rozdilna … In every movement, every manoeuvre, the men looked so tired that they might drop and fall asleep. But despite their tiredness they stubbornly pressed home the attack.
>
> On the eastern edge of the village, the Cossacks and tankers captured seven 210mm guns, dozens of vehicles with various military equipment, a large herd of cattle, and other loot.[12]

The cavalry encountered by Pliev's regiments were Romanian troops, caught up in the chaotic retreat. Pressing forward, the Soviet cavalry overwhelmed the ad hoc German defences around Rozdilna, capturing further loot in the numerous railway sidings near the town. The main rail line to the west from Odessa had now been cut, and a train soon arrived at the station from Odessa, unaware that the area was now in Soviet hands; its occupants were swiftly made prisoner. Other German units also arrived, resulting in confused fighting, but the capture of the town by Pliev's group left Army Group A in a perilous position. With some units still struggling many miles to the east, trying to withdraw over the various rivers, Ferdinand Schörner – who was now commander of Army Group South Ukraine – had two broad options. One was to try to fight through the Horse and Mechanised Group in order to reach Tiraspol; the other was to withdraw along the coast and to try to reach the Dniester estuary along a narrow coastal road. Whilst the latter might involve less fighting, it would leave a wide gap between the troops that escaped and German forces further north.

Meanwhile, Pliev attempted to regroup his men and take stock of their successes. His soldiers were variously amused and angered to find that many of the rail wagons bore signs giving their departure and destination stations. After capturing Odessa, Antonescu, the Romanian leader, had renamed the city in his own honour, and many of the trains that had been captured had been proceeding from 'Antonescu' to Bucharest. In addition to military equipment, the Soviet soldiers found large quantities of loot, and several hundred Soviet civilians – forced labourers who had been intended to increase the workforce for Germany's war industries. In addition to the renamed city, there were other names that were unusual. The region had been the home of a significant population of Germans who had settled in the area in the 19th century, and village names such as Mannheim, Strasbourg, and Baden bore testimony to this.

Satisfied that his units could continue their advance, Pliev now moved directly towards Odessa whilst sending a strong force towards the Dniester. Although this divided his units, he remained confident that the Germans lacked the mobile formations they would require to launch significant counterattacks to take advantage of his move, and other Soviet units – Thirty-Seventh and Forty-Sixth Armies, and Eighth Guards Army – were now approaching the Kuchurhan River. A swift advance by Major General Ivan Vasilevich Tutarinov's 9th Cavalry Division reached and captured the town of Ovidiopol to the west of Odessa. This town lies at the southern end of a large freshwater lagoon created by the waters of the Dniester, and was the location of the water pumping facilities that the Germans had intended to destroy, and Pliev was relieved to learn that the demolition charges had been disarmed before they could be triggered. German units moving towards the west crossed behind Tutarinov's cavalry and there was further heavy fighting in and around the village of Bilyaivka, a little to the north. By the end of 6 April, Bilyaivka was firmly in Soviet hands. Overnight, Pliev learned that he had received the award Hero of the Soviet Union.[13]

The city of Odessa is on the site of a large ancient Greek settlement that was established in the 6th century BC. It was variously ruled by local tribes, the Golden Horde, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the Ottoman Empire before falling to the Russians in 1789. Catherine the Great renamed the city Odessa, and it became home to one of the most diverse and varied populations of any city in Europe. Writing from the city when he was exiled there in 1824, the poet Alexander Pushkin wrote that its 'air is filled with all Europe'.[14] One of the largest ethnic groups in the city was the Jews, who moved to Odessa in large numbers in the later years of the 19th century, comprising over a third of its population despite repeated violence against them. In 1905, Odessa was the scene of a mutiny by the crew of the battleship *Potemkin*, and there was heavy fighting in the region during the Russian Civil War. In 1941, German and Romanian troops reached the outskirts of the city on 5 August, but Soviet troops continued to defend Odessa until 16 October. Although many residents had fled into the Soviet interior, others were trapped by the German advance, including over 80,000 Jews. The Red Army had left remote-controlled explosives buried in the city and the detonation of one such mine a week after its fall resulted in the death of the Romanian military commander. The occupation forces promptly blamed this on Jews and Communists and there were immediate mass killings of civilians as a reprisal, with perhaps as many as 10,000 being shot or hanged.[15] The Jewish population was then ordered to proceed to the village of Dalnik, where hundreds more were killed, mainly by Romanian troops. By November, the Romanian occupation authorities estimated that there were about 60,000 Jews left in the city and they were confined either in a ghetto or a concentration camp near the village of Bogdanovka. Those in the camp included Jews from other nearby areas and most were killed during the first winter. The ghetto was cleared in early 1942; most died in a series of forced marches and mass executions. As the tide of war turned against them, the Romanians stopped the execution of Jews, allowing them to work as labourers and actively blocking their deportation to extermination camps.

The remaining civilians in Odessa now faced the prospect of further fighting. Hitler declared the city a fortress, and on 9 April Pliev received orders from Malinovsky to attack into the southern parts of Odessa. Under clearing skies –

and therefore a resumption of Luftwaffe attacks – the Horse and Mechanised Group attacked towards the city:

> Our action was covered – or rather, should have been covered – by IX Mixed Aviation Corps under the command of Major General [Oleg Viktorovich] Tolstikov. Along with other combat missions, this corps was entrusted with 'providing air cover for the front line combat forces with fighter patrols, concentrating its main effort on the mobile unit of General Pliev'. I don't know to what extent its other tasks were accomplished, but as for covering our group's troops from the air – well, many years later, at a military history conference in Odessa on the 20th anniversary of the liberation of the city from Nazi occupation, General Tolstikov said: 'Due to the unsuitability of airfields and extremely bad weather conditions, our fighters could not reliably cover Pliev's mobile group. We concentrated on protecting the rear area units of the mobile group.'[16]

Although he doesn't explicitly make the point, Pliev's irritation about the manner in which the same weather and conditions didn't appear to hinder the Luftwaffe is clear.

The village of Dalnik, to the west of Odessa, where so many civilians had been slaughtered in 1941, fell to Pliev's cavalry in a sudden attack. The first Soviet tanks to break into the village promptly ran out of fuel, and they and their crews were overwhelmed by a German counterattack, but other Soviet units pressed on into the outskirts of Odessa. There were repeated clashes far to the rear of the Soviet front line as German units continued to fight their way to the west, but the fighting was most intense in Odessa itself as Pliev's men tried to storm the German defences before they could be organised:

> A great tide of Kuban Cossacks crossed the railway and rushed to the nearby woodland. Standing in my jeep, I saw the battle banner of 34th Guards Regiment fluttering in the wind. My eye was caught by a Sherman tank, on the right side of which sat the commander of the tank regiment in a black leather jacket with epaulets and a Cuban hat pulled low over his eyes …
>
> Despite the roar of engines, the constant rumble of thousands of hoofs, the thundering 'Hurra!' of the soldiers, the rifle fire and machine-gun bursts, every enemy gunshot was clearly heard. At first, the German fire was intense. A direct hit from an anti-tank shell blew off the turret of the Sherman tank on which the new regiment commander had been sitting. Miraculously, his body remained, leaning on its side. But above the leather epaulets there was no head with a hat

> pulled over his eyes. These English tanks were called 'Bratskaya mogila chetyrekh' [four-man grave] by us, and were generally unreliable. Over there, the Cossack Kazachin fell from his horse. I looked around for a moment. He jumped up and was immediately scooped up by one of his comrades who slowed, and swung up in front of him. The horse of Lieutenant Colonel Geraskin fell as if stumbling. It managed to stay on its feet and ran on, limping heavily on its injured leg. I saw Liutenant Colonel Geraskin slowly slip from the saddle, clinging to the horse's mane. Senior Lieutenant Kuev, commander of 4th Squadron, jumped up to him. In a letter, he later wrote about this: 'I rushed up to him. He was covered in blood. A bullet had pierced his chest, another had passed through the flesh of his chin. We carried the regiment commander to the first house on the outskirts of Odessa.'
>
> Bullets howled their evil song of death. They were accompanied by shell explosions. For a moment, the tide of horses and tanks was mingled with masses of confused enemy soldiers, and the field was covered with Nazi corpses. This was the German division's rearguard regiment. Then we burst into the streets of Odessa. Major General [Vasily Sergeevich] Golovskoi's cavalry [30th Cavalry Division] was particularly successful. Its blow fell on the main forces of the withdrawing German division, forcing their surrender.[17]

Odessa was soon in Soviet hands, with infantry units breaking into the city from the north and linking up with partisan units that were fighting within the suburbs and city centre. The Axis defenders of the city were drawn from a number of different units – elements of the Romanian Third Army, and the German Sixth Army's IIIX, XLIV, and LXXII Corps – and were simultaneously facing east against the advancing units of the Soviet Fifth Shock Army while trying to fend off Pliev's attack into their rear areas and the advance of the Soviet Eighth and Sixth Armies from the north, but most managed to extricate themselves from the imminent encirclement and retreated to the lower Dniester. But there was no rest for the Horse and Mechanised Group. It was ordered to retrace its steps and press on to the lower Dniester.

While Malinovsky's 3rd Ukrainian Front was tearing apart the seam in the German line between Sixth and Eighth Armies, the crisis further to the northwest – on the seam between Eighth Army and First Panzer Army – also grew more serious for the Germans. Having established contact, albeit tenuous, with 1st Ukrainian Front behind the German First Panzer Army, Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front received instructions from *Stavka* to continue the pursuit of German forces to and beyond the Southern Bug. The thrust to the southwest potentially left Konev's eastern flank exposed and he ordered his left flank formations, Fourth and

Seventh Guards Armies, to attack towards the south in order to try to turn the flank of Wöhler's Eighth Army. To assist them, he released his last mobile reserves, V Guards Cavalry Corps.

The leading units of Second Tank Army were ordered to secure crossings over the Southern Bug at Dzhulynka and reached the river late on 11 March. Here, they found the roads to the bridge choked with German traffic and immediately crashed into the German columns, creating panic and confusion. Determined to strike before the Germans could organise themselves, the Soviet detachment commander divided his forces in two – one was left to deal with the ad hoc German garrison in Dzhulynka, while the other tried to seize the bridge. As the leading tank approached the crossing, German engineers detonated demolition charges. Several hundred Germans were trapped on the wrong side of the river, but the destruction of the bridge held up the Soviet armour for two precious days while repairs were made. In the meantime, Soviet units began to cross the river in pontoon boats, but moving tanks to the far bank was clearly a different issue. Konev described the solution adopted by Second Tank Army:

> Tanks were much more difficult to transfer than infantry. They required heavy bridges or ferries, but the tankers of Shumilov's Second Tank Army showed great resourcefulness. They found a relatively shallow crossing point with water at a depth of 2m. The site was carefully surveyed and signposts were positioned. The tanks' exhaust pipes were modified so they ran above the deck, and all hatches were tightly battened down and smeared with grease. By midday on 12 March, seven tanks had crossed by driving on the riverbed at a depth of 2m. Their sudden appearance dismayed the enemy. Moving forward rapidly, these tanks ensured the expansion of the bridgehead.[18]

The heavyweight German Tiger tanks often struggled with bridges and had been equipped with schnorkels to allow them to cross rivers, and the Red Army had already begun to copy this design; however, it would be nearly another year before its use became widespread. In the meantime, soldiers improvised as best they could.

The operational orders for Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front had called for an advance to the Southern Bug, in order to secure bridgeheads over the river of sufficient size to prevent the Germans from using it as a defensive line. By the third week of March, this had effectively been achieved, and the pace of the operation by the northern half of his Front had been everything that Konev might have wanted, regardless of weather and terrain difficulties. This was partly the consequence of Hitler's order for units to hold on to their positions at all costs, and partly a crippling reluctance of German rear area authorities to hand back control of their areas to the military as the front line approached. There was no attempt made to move rear area units in a timely manner – such orders would have been contrary to Hitler's demands – and when combat formations were driven back, they found it almost impossible to move along roads choked with supply and logistic services, medical personnel, workers from occupation authorities, and dozens of other non-combatant bodies. Combined with crippling fuel shortages, these tangled columns of vehicles were simply abandoned and the survivors continued to flee on foot. Without artillery and supplies, the Wehrmacht units had almost no ability to resist; the Soviet advance would only be halted by weather, lengthening supply lines, or the intervention of German reserves. Given the pressure upon German resources everywhere and *Führerbefehl 51*, the appearance of such reserves was exceedingly unlikely.

Konev was planning further operations that would take his troops to and beyond the Dniester. Whilst the tank armies on his western flank continued to press forward as fast as they could, he grew impatient with slower progress to the east, where Fourth and Seventh Guards Armies continued to encounter resistance despite being reinforced. His response was as uncompromising as ever, and as already described, he sent a sharp signal to the commanders of the two armies on 15 March urging them to show greater alacrity. But regardless of the failings – real or perceived – of his subordinates, logistic issues continued to be the main drag on Konev's advance, and he ordered his army commanders to use local civilians to provide aid, showing as little compunction as the Wehrmacht had on earlier occasions. On 17 March, the leading units of 2nd Ukrainian Front reached the Dniester and Konev continued to urge his units onward, hoping to reach the lower Dniester valley and thus prevent the withdrawal of the German Eighth and Sixth Armies to the west. The two wings of his army were now becoming increasingly separated, but this was only a problem if the Germans were able to concentrate forces for a counterattack, and it was increasingly obvious that this was not remotely the case.

Between the advancing units of 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts, the battered units of Wöhler's Eighth Army tried to pull back with at least some semblance of order. Given the overall situation, the only hope for the numerically inferior German forces was to attempt an elastic defence, but several factors worked against them. Firstly, Hitler continued to insist on stubborn defence, forbidding even local withdrawals; secondly, the roads to the rear were choked with the detritus of the German occupation authorities and other formations, greatly hindering any attempt by German commanders to extract their few mobile formations and to use these even in local counterattacks; and thirdly, the pervasive mud added to the confusion and difficulty. Units like 14th Panzer Division, which might have been able to mount stinging counterattacks as they had done in the past, had their hands full trying to prevent their various elements from being dispersed and tangled in the mass of German rear area units struggling to pull back to the Dniester where – it was hoped – it might be possible to organise a new defensive line. Veterans of 14th Panzer Division later recalled the chaotic retreat to and over the Viss River, about 36 miles [60km] north of the Southern Bug:

> Immediately after leaving the accommodation in Kaligorka some vehicles became stuck in the mud and blocked the road. Stretches of road several kilometres long appeared to be impassable and eventually the bridge in Nadlak was also damaged and blocked. Hundreds of vehicles had piled up on the bridge approach and it was no simple matter to extract the intermingled marching columns one vehicle at a time as they approached and redirect them to Yampol.
>
> When they finally got there they came across the same scene – mud, mud and more mud and, as a consequence, immense columns of trucks, amongst which bombs from Soviet aircraft fell repeatedly. Finally, with the greatest difficulty, the panzer regiment staff succeeded in crossing the river. The rear area units had to return to Nadlak, where the bridge had meanwhile been repaired and cleared.[19]

When they reached the Southern Bug at Pervomaisk, the exhausted soldiers of 14th Panzer Division had no respite. The river crossing in the town was blocked by a huge tangle of vehicles, and it took three days for the division to get most of its combat units to the south bank, where they were directed 17 miles (28km) west to Krivoy Ozero; it would take at least a further two days for all elements to assemble and the division's staff decided to use the intervening time to organise their remaining units, together with a small number of reinforcements and stragglers from other formations, into new battlegroups. But with the Red Army already on the Dniester, still some 39 miles (65km) to the southwest, there was no time to waste. Unrein's division was ordered to move west in an attempt to protect the western flank of Eighth Army. A change in the weather left the roads comparatively dry for a change and on 18 March, the leading units of the division reached Balta, beyond which they were able to establish tenuous contact with parts of *SS-Totenkopf* further to the west. For a day, the soldiers took up positions facing north, expecting at any moment that the Red Army would appear, but there was almost no contact with the enemy: Konev's columns had already bypassed the open flank of the German position to the west. When he became aware of this after receiving reports from Luftwaffe reconnaissance flights, Unrein ordered his division to continue moving west.

The Dniester is a large river, between 50m and 150m wide as it flows through Mogilev-Podolski, where Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army reached it. The retreating Germans blew the large bridge in the city as they withdrew to the southwest bank, and Red Army engineers arrived on 18 March. Ferries were constructed and infantry began to cross the river. Using a mixture of their own equipment and materiel captured from the Germans, the Soviet engineers laboured to establish a pontoon bridge, hampered considerably by the strong current in the river, which was swollen due to the developing thaw. Konev's impatience with the armies on his eastern flank was exacerbated when he received a message from *Stavka* on 22 March, criticising his Front for lagging behind Zhukov's 1st Ukrainian Front to the west. Further directives were sent to the armies of his command, urging greater energy. Rotmistrov's tank army turned west, advancing through almost open ground in the rear of the German First Panzer Army, while other forces continued the drive towards the south.

The news from Konev's eastern flank was somewhat better by the end of the day. After a battle lasting for several days, Fifth Guards Army finally overcame German resistance and captured the city of Pervomaisk and forced a crossing over the Southern Bug. It is noteworthy that Konev described the capture of men from eight German and Romanian divisions, but the total haul of prisoners was only 'over a thousand'. The German units were badly below strength and the increasingly chaotic retreat had resulted in groups of stragglers becoming hopelessly entangled. The ability of these mixed groups to put up more than token resistance was very limited.

In addition to 14th Panzer Division, *Grossdeutschland* was moving west towards the Dniester in the same general area. Most of the division had been east of Pervomaisk when the Soviet offensive began, and – as was often the case with major redeployments – much of the division was moved by rail, in an attempt to lengthen Eighth Army's western flank and to prevent the Red Army from rolling up the entire front. Some elements passed through Pervomaisk on 17 March, but the close proximity of the leading Soviet troops soon brought an end to rail movement. Like all German armoured formations, *Grossdeutschland* was accompanied by its integral workshop teams, and a large number of damaged armoured vehicles that were awaiting the arrival of spare parts had to be destroyed:

> The urge to drive west was irresistible in spite of the knee-deep mud, then renewed snowstorms, as well as overcrowded roads. Gun tractors pulled long trains of wheeled vehicles behind them. Any semblance of order dissolved.
>
> The entire length of this stretch of highway was littered with bogged-down vehicles. There were overturned trucks, cast-aside *panye* wagons with broken axles and many vehicles that had been blown up. In the midst of the chaos were mud-splattered soldiers and officers, shouting, cursing, struggling in vain to untangle this hopeless mess. But their efforts were hopeless. The Soviet close-support aircraft were omnipresent, strafing the columns and adding to the general atmosphere of chaos. Here sat a munitions train, blown apart, there a lone, blazing truck: signposts along the path of the German retreat.[20]

It was a far cry from the heady days of 1941 when the Wehrmacht had moved swiftly and irresistibly through the same area on its march east.

After a couple of days of moving through an eerily empty landscape – the Soviet armour had already passed through the area and the following units were still some way to the rear – 14th Panzer Division ran into Soviet forces near Ribnitza, on the Dniester, on 20 March. The town was defended by a battlegroup of Romanian infantrymen and, with the help of a few Tiger tanks that had been accompanying 14th Panzer Division, the Romanians drove off several Soviet tanks and small groups of infantry. There was a small bridge over the river here, and this had inevitably attracted columns of German vehicles; it took two days for 14th Panzer Division to cross to the far bank. *Grossdeutschland* had also been directed to the Ribnitza crossing but was then ordered to turn south and make for Kishinev (now the Moldovan city of Chisinau). Once across the river, combat elements were dispatched to the northwest. The intention was for them to combine forces with 14th Panzer Division in order to attack as rapidly as possible towards the northwest in an attempt to establish a new defensive line.

After 20 days of almost continuous advance, Konev's leading elements reached and crossed the Prut River on 25 March, thus passing the 1941 frontier of the Soviet Union. There was no time to pause and celebrate. The infantry of Trofimenko's Twenty-Seventh Army and Koroteyev's Fifty-Second Army now began to advance into Romanian territory. Konev recorded that his men often didn't imprison Romanians that they captured, and simply disarmed them and sent them home. Whilst this may have happened in some cases, there is plentiful evidence that on other occasions, Romanians were shot out of hand and thousands continued to be taken prisoner. Inevitably, the arrival of Soviet troops on the old frontier was an event greeted with many pronouncements in the Soviet press. The newspaper *Izvestia* announced:

> Hitler tried to erase the line of the USSR state border with the soles of the boots of German soldiers. But the Soviet people vowed to exterminate all the German invaders who came to our homeland to enslave it …
>
> The day is near when the mighty Soviet state will once again become inviolable along its entire frontier. Our enemies will remember for a long time that attacking the Soviet lands means signing a death sentence for themselves![21]

Inevitably, the operation took a heavy toll on the Soviet armoured forces. German resistance, while sporadic, accounted for many Soviet tanks, and others were left stranded by breakdowns or stuck in the muddy terrain. As Konev's troops crossed into Romania, Second Tank Army reported that it had been reduced to just 36 tanks and 12 assault guns; Fifth Guards Tank Army had nine tanks and seven assault guns; and Sixth Tank Army had 40 tanks and six assault guns.[22] With a collective strength of significantly less than the establishment of a panzer division, it is little surprise that the Soviet tank forces could do little to stop bypassed German and Romanian formations from slipping through to the west and southwest. Much of their artillery was dozens of kilometres behind the front line, and even infantry units were far ahead of their artillery and support services. According to Konev, it was clear to him that a major operational pause was desperately needed, and perhaps to highlight what had been achieved – and thus head off demands for even more progress – he sent a signal to *Stavka* describing how his men had advanced for three weeks over rapidly thawing ground, covering 105 miles (175km) and crossing both the Southern Bug and Dniester. He listed a multitude of German and Romanian units that he claimed to have defeated and that his men had killed over 62,000 enemy soldiers and captured nearly 19,000, as well as destroying or capturing over 600 tanks and 1,200 guns.[23] He failed to add the losses suffered by his armies; conservative estimates suggest that 2nd Ukrainian Front lost at least 66,000 men killed and over 200,000 wounded.

In early 1943, as the German line along the Don collapsed, the Red Army had mounted a series of increasingly ambitious operations with depleted forces. It was understandable that with signs of almost total collapse of the German defences, a degree of operational greed should develop, but ultimately this led to disaster when Manstein unleashed his counteroffensive that established a new line along the Donets. A year later, with German forces in Ukraine apparently in full flight, similar thinking seems to have prevailed. Despite the inclement terrain and appalling state of the roads, despite greatly extended supply lines, and despite the heavy losses that had reduced both infantry and tank units of the Red Army to shadows of their former strength, Stalin urged his commanders to make one more effort, and as is described below, this – like the last phases of the fighting in the spring of 1943 – would be a considerable setback for the Soviet forces.

Further west, the trials and tribulations of 24th Panzer Division continued unabated during this period. On 17 March, the Soviet XXIII Tank Corps continued to push west, reaching and crossing the Southern Bug. The retreating German forces were still some way to the east and crossed the Gniloy Yelanets River during the day. There were growing signs that both sides were unaware of the precise location of their opponents, as a group of panzergrenadiers discovered when they were ordered to occupy a village that they had been told was still free of Soviet troops:

> The commander was marching up forward with the spearhead platoon. Suddenly the spearhead took cover and the commander waved at us to hurry forward. The battalion was widely spread out with 10m between men due to the long march. In this moment, the enemy must have become aware of the approach of our leading platoon. We saw how the Rittmeister and the spearhead platoon ran forward with loud shouts about 500m from the hilltop and disappeared over it. With the greatest haste possible, we all reached the hill a few seconds later. An astonishing scene lay before us: in the hollow were about 15 artillery pieces, some already firing and others still being towed, and there were Russians swarming everywhere. Stunned by our sudden attack, they mainly ran off, dragging the guns that were still limbered up with them. After a few minutes they began to fight back, turning the deployed guns towards us and taking up positions with machine-guns. But we soon overcame their resistance and the battalion simply overran the Russians, which proved to be easier because the Russians appeared not to have any overall command. This success, for which the Rittmeister later received the Knight's Cross, was only possible through surprise. It was all the more important because the enemy's fire on the main road had already caused considerable confusion, all the more so because the entire area was earlier thought to be free of the enemy. Unfortunately we too suffered some casualties, with two dead and a few wounded.[24]

Eight guns were captured and later destroyed by a platoon of pioneers who arrived after nightfall. As they withdrew, the panzergrenadiers found that a village in their path was in Soviet hands, but attacked under cover of a snowstorm, capturing several horses, wagons, and supplies before continuing on their way. Finding themselves attacked from three sides by Soviet troops, the Germans became disordered and a group of prisoners they had taken in the village took advantage of the confusion to escape. Through a mixture of good fortune and the intervention of an energetic officer at a critical moment, they managed to fight off their pursuers and escape through a small wood. The following day, the division continued to work its way west, repeatedly turning to contest the main road running west with pursuing Soviet troops. Just two days later, the Red Army was once more threatening to turn the division's southern flank and roll up LVII Panzer Corps, and consequently Eighth Army, towards the north. Once more, 24th Panzer Division concentrated its diminished resources and launched a counterattack to drive off the Soviet forces. It proved to be the last role that the division played in the campaign. As its battalions withdrew behind the Southern Bug, they were finally pulled out of line. The stragglers from other units that had been conscripted into the ranks were released, leaving the panzergrenadier battalions at barely the strength of a single company. With almost all of their heavy equipment lost, the men were transported to Romania by air for what they hoped would be some hard-earned rest and an opportunity to rearm. Whilst the division's personnel had survived, the Red Army was justified in claiming that it had effectively removed the division from the German order of battle for the time being.

As is described in the next chapter, the battered remnants of First Panzer Army escaped to the west, and the soldiers of Eighth and Sixth Armies managed to reach safety along the line of the Carpathian Mountains, albeit at the cost of losing almost all of their heavy equipment. It was a crushing defeat for the Wehrmacht and contributed considerably to the dismissals of Manstein and Kleist. Whilst Manstein had undoubtedly achieved great successes in the past and had skilfully prevented major defeat in 1943, there can be little doubt that the fighting of March 1944 saw his army group come close to complete destruction. Hitler's refusal to give him freedom for manoeuvre undoubtedly contributed hugely to the scale of the defeat, but it seems that Manstein's alternative strategy at this point of the war to wear down the Red Army in order to force some sort of stalemate was as unrealistic as the demands by Hitler for a dogged defence. The resources of the Soviet Union were simply too great to be defeated by either policy, and like other senior German figures, Manstein seems to have been slow to realise this. The cause of this was at least partly the compartmentalisation of the German war machine, and it is likely that Manstein and others did not receive detailed information about Soviet resources; nevertheless, the evidence of the fighting of 1943 should have made it abundantly clear to all German commanders that the Red Army was far from running out of men and tanks.

Karl-Adolf Hollidt, who in late 1942 had taken command of a conglomerate of ad hoc formations and cobbled them together to create an eponymous army detachment that was later renamed Sixth Army, was also dismissed. It was effectively the end of his army career, and after the war he was convicted of using both prisoners and civilians as forced labour, and aiding the forcible deportation of civilians to Germany. He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and released in late 1949; when he died in 1985, aged 94, he was the last surviving Wehrmacht Generaloberst. His nominated replacement as commander of Sixth Army was General Sigfrid Henrici, who had commanded XL Panzer Corps the previous year with distinction before being badly wounded, and had been serving as the head of *Festland-Stab Krim* ('Mainland Staff Crimea'). Before he could take control of Sixth Army, Hitler changed his mind and gave command of Sixth Army to General Maximilian de Angelis, who had been commander of XLIV Corps. Originally from southeast Austria, he was an early adherent to the Nazis, leading the illegal *Nationalsozialistischen Soldantenring* ('National Socialist Soldiers' Circle') during the 1930s. He became State Secretary for Defence in Austria in March 1938 after the death of General Wilhelm Zehner; several Gestapo officers visited Zehner's apartment and reported that he had shot himself, but it was widely believed that the Gestapo had executed him. There were attempts after the war to prosecute the Gestapo personnel, but they were acquitted, both in 1945 and again in 1951. At a time when trust between Hitler and his generals was steadily declining, it was inevitable that a man with de Angelis' credentials would catch the Führer's eye.

CHAPTER 8

THE WANDERING POCKET

The encirclement of First Panzer Army was one of several disasters that Manstein had repeatedly warned might happen. In essence, his army group – indeed, the entire German position on the Eastern Front – was far too weak and was deployed over too great a breadth for Soviet penetrations to be prevented, and there were inadequate armoured reserves behind the front line to intercept such penetrations. In this latest offensive, the few German reserves had been drawn into the fighting within the first two or three days. Once these units had been bypassed, the only question was how far the Red Army could advance over deteriorating, difficult roads. Zhukov and Konev had demonstrated that, even with the spring muddy season developing around them, they had sufficient mobility to break up the German line and encircle a large part of it.

The forces that had been isolated in the Kamanets-Podolski encirclement when Soviet tanks met in the rear of First Panzer Army were considerable, and there was no serious prospect of them being overwhelmed rapidly. In addition, there were sufficient supplies within the encirclement to ensure that – at least for the moment – the trapped units still retained a degree of mobility and firepower. Four corps – LIX Corps and III, XXIV, and XLVI Panzer Corps – comprising 21 divisions with a total of 220,000 men were in the pocket, but although the formations included several panzer divisions, they had fewer than 100 tanks and assault guns between them. The Soviet forces around the pocket were far stronger and even if they couldn't overwhelm the Germans, they might succeed in breaking up the pocket into smaller encirclements before defence could be organised. However, the Red Army's troops were spread over a large area. Only modest Soviet forces had succeeded in making contact south of the Dniester; for the moment, the encirclement was tenuous. There were good prospects for a breakout, if it were ordered in time. If the Red Army was permitted to harden its encirclement, Germany would face a defeat on the scale of Stalingrad. It had been possible to recover from that disaster by the transfer of large numbers of men from the west and through Manstein's remarkable counteroffensive of early 1943; this time, there would be no reserves available, and the Red Army was a far more formidable foe. The destruction of First Panzer Army might well spell the end of the war, and would certainly make its eventual outcome inevitable.

On paper at least, the Red Army's units were numerous and surely powerful enough ultimately to overwhelm Hube's army. Four tank armies were to the north, west and southwest of the encirclement, and Eighteenth and Thirty-Eighth Armies were moving up to support the armour. But as Zhukov recorded, his armies were badly depleted by months of constant fighting. Having almost completely run out of tanks, Third Guards Tank Army was pulled out of line and assigned to the *Stavka* reserve where it would be replenished; Fourth Tank Army, barely in a better state, remained to the south of Kamanets-Podolski. In addition, the Red Army was uncertain of the overall situation, as Zhukov described:

> All of this taken together did not allow for vigorous action by my troops to break up and destroy the enemy's surrounded group. Now, analysing the entire operation, I believe that First Tank Army should have been turned east from the Czortków [now Chortkiv] area to strike into the encirclement. But at the time we had solid intelligence from numerous sources that the encircled enemy intended to break through over the Dniester to the south in the area of Zaleschikov. Such an operation seemed quite possible and logical. In this event, having crossed the Dniester, the enemy could occupy the southern bank of the river and organise a defensive line. This was facilitated by the fact that Fortieth Army on the right flank of 2nd Ukrainian Front had not reached Chotin even by 30 March.
>
> We believed that in these circumstances it was necessary to thrust deeper past the enemy with First Tank Army, transferring its main weight south of the Dniester, and to seize the area around Zaleshchikov, Chernivtsi and Kolomiya.[1]

Manstein responded promptly to the news that the Red Army had achieved a tenuous encirclement. Early on 24 March, he sent a signal to *OKH* advising that he intended to issue orders for First Panzer Army to break out. There were two options for such a breakout, and German disagreements over these probably contributed to the intelligence that Zhukov used to keep First Tank Army south of the Dniester. This area, where the Soviet spearheads had met, was still relatively free of Red Army units, and it might be possible for First Panzer Army to try to reach the Carpathian passes by heading south without being drawn into heavy fighting. Aware of this, Zhukov was trying to reinforce First Tank Army to act as a blocking force. Manstein informed *OKH* that despite this apparent opportunity to escape towards the south, his preferred option was a breakout to the west. His signal was sent at midday, and aware that Hitler was prone to prevaricate when faced by a decision that he wished to avoid, Manstein added a final sentence advising Zeitzler and Hitler that in the absence of instructions to the contrary, he would issue orders to Hube at 1500.

The response from *OKH* arrived an hour later. Hitler approved the planned breakout, but only on condition that First Panzer Army continued to hold its current positions. This was similar to the manner in which Hitler had behaved during the Stalingrad encirclement, giving permission for Sixth Army to make preparations for a breakout but only on condition that it didn't concede any territory. Such a policy was doomed to failure, as it would require the full resources of First Panzer Army to conduct a successful breakout – attempting to do this while still holding the existing perimeter risked failure on both counts. Manstein contacted Zeitzler by telephone; the chief of general staff told Manstein that he agreed with the field marshal, but Hitler did not appear to grasp the full gravity of the situation. When Manstein put his objections in writing, he was summoned back to Germany for further discussions.

A further unhelpful signal reached Manstein's headquarters from within the pocket. Hube stated that he wished to break out to the south rather than to the west. Manstein regarded this as a serious error, just as likely as Hitler's order to result in failure. As the accompanying map shows, the terrain south of the Dniester – and particularly south of the Prut – is increasingly mountainous and densely forested, which would hinder any attempt by First Panzer Army to restore contact with Fourth Panzer Army to the west:

> [A breakout to the south] was certainly the easier course at that particular moment. If the army took the western route it would have to fight its way to freedom against two Soviet tank armies, whereas at present it could escape across the Dniester without becoming involved in any really serious fighting.
>
> I still could not accept Hube's view, however. First of all, it was indispensable that First Panzer Army should re-establish contact with Fourth Panzer Army in the west. How else could the enemy be prevented from breaking through to Galicia north of the Carpathians? The best thing that could happen if the army took the southern route was that it would finish up being forced away into mountains … Superficially, the way across the Dniester looked the less hazardous

> of the two. But closer examination showed that it would lead to disaster. The army possessed no bridging materials for crossing the river on a broad front. Any attempt to cross by the few secure bridges now in existence would expose it to attack from the enemy air force and cause the loss of most of the heavy equipment. Worst of all, the enemy [2nd Ukrainian Front] was already advancing west south of the Dniester, and sooner or later First Panzer Army must become sandwiched between the latter and the two tank armies which, having just cut its rear communications, were now preparing to cross the river behind it.
>
> I therefore made it quite clear to Hube that the army group would not permit his army to retire towards the south bank of the Dniester but would order a breakthrough to the west.[2]

Within the encirclement, few soldiers at any level were aware of this new development; the struggle of day-to-day combat absorbed all their energy. Obersturmbannführer Albert Frey, an officer with *LSSAH*, later recalled his battlegroup's withdrawal to a new defensive position:

> Pulling back to this line was extremely difficult. We only had one route open to us. West of this road was a long, deep, impassable ravine. Mud covered the road and the flat terrain extending to the east. Both were totally unsuited to rapid motorised movement. We had to capture the road before we could use it. We launched an attack with infantry forces … but our forces were insufficient. The attack was only partially successful. We were able to push the Russians varying distances back from the road. At one place, friend and foe occupied trenches directly opposite one another on either edge of the road …
>
> Recalling the events of that period reminds me how huge the 'defensive sectors' were in comparison to the forces assigned to them. We could only conduct defensive fighting under these circumstances by setting up small strongpoints, some of which could not even see each other.[3]

Further south, 1st Panzer Division was in Gorodok, attempting to prevent Soviet forces from thrusting into the western flank of the encirclement. As its units were driven back towards the southwest, the rearguard found itself isolated and only a few men managed to rejoin the division, as the adjutant of the combat engineer battalion later wrote:

> As the rearguard pulling out of Aleksinnets Polnyk [northeast of Gorodok] at 1500, 1 Company of 37th Armoured Combat Engineer Battalion left just in

> time under fire from tanks. It then had to fight its way against light tanks and anti-tank guns through the first Soviet blocking position. After that, its light half-tracks came under concentrated fire. Enemy tanks approached from all sides, and also heavy assault guns. After the reconnaissance battalion, reinforced by tanks, had managed to pass through, the Russians fired systematically on the light vehicles of the rearguard. Leutnant Kirchner told the company to dismount. Under covering fire from their half-tracks, he had to try to lead his panzer pioneers through the Russian lines in a decisive attack on foot. Unfortunately, the brave company commander was the first to be wounded. Crushed by machine-gun fire from the enemy tanks, his company was driven to ground and smashed.
>
> On 25 March about 26 panzer pioneers reached the battalion. The last group of eight pioneers were led by Feldwebel Schmidt. They carried eight wounded from 1 Company who they had found on their march through the enemy lines with them, and two dead who they wished to lay down for their final rest with the battalion. Feldwebel Schmidt reported that Leutnant Kirchner and Feldwebel Luedecke had been taken prisoner.
>
> An attempt by Hauptmann Bärwinckel to probe either side of the road to the northeast to determine the location of the rest of the rearguard was abandoned on orders from the division commander after the first reconnaissance probes, as a new Russian attack supported by tanks was approaching from the northern side of Gorodok, and the reconnaissance battalion had to intervene as the division's last reserve.[4]

A signal arrived from LIX Corps ordering 1st Panzer Division to hold onto Gorodok at all costs – it was vital for the defence of the western side of the pocket, and *Gruppe Mauss* was still operating some distance to the north, effectively isolated as a separate pocket. With ammunition running low, particularly for the division's artillery, and both flanks already bypassed, Generalmajor Werner Marcks, who had replaced Koll as division commander, decided that it was futile to remain in his current positions and ordered the abandonment of the town.

News now reached 1st Panzer Division of unexpected reinforcements. A train carrying 40 new Panther tanks was expected in Chernivtsi and the division was ordered to send a battalion composed of tank crews that had lost their tanks to the city in order to take possession of the new vehicles. Led by Major Harry Düntsch, the crewmen set off immediately, but as they approached Chernivtsi they found that the road was blocked by Soviet troops. Düntsch attempted to break through the opposition in the hope that the city – or at least the railway station – hadn't yet fallen to the Red Army, but after taking substantial losses, the battalion was dispersed. Düntsch managed to rally the survivors and infiltrated his way through the Soviet lines towards the southwest, past the outskirts of Chernivtsi, which was clearly under Soviet control. His group moved cautiously through the Carpathian foothills, collecting a number of stragglers and a couple of defensive units that had been improvised from rear area formations, and ultimately managed to reach Hungary.[5]

Throughout the fighting, both sides had struggled with road conditions as the weather turned increasingly towards the spring thaw. On the German side, there were additional problems caused by interminable traffic jams in the rear areas, where non-combatant units competed with fighting formations for road space. Matters were worsened by the reluctance of many units, even those in the front line, to part with non-essential equipment and vehicles, and in an attempt to improve matters, Hube sent an irritated signal to his corps commanders for promulgation to all units:

> The undeniable will of all to break through successfully to the west and not be driven to the south will lead to success.
>
> I insist that all vehicles that are not essential, and that cannot continue easily, are to be destroyed in order to preserve fuel. They will be lost anyway! More horse-drawn wagons, and even then only for combat needs, communications equipment, ammunition for heavy weapons and the transport of wounded, are to be procured.
>
> Everything else is ballast and hinders our success!
>
> Stragglers are to be combined into units and attached to combat formations.[6]

Despite this order, soldiers frequently reported that there were still numerous trucks on the roads carrying personal items or looted goods. In some cases, military police personnel began to take a hand. At a bridge over the Zbrucz River, all vehicles were stopped and those without all-wheel drive, or deemed not essential for combat, were forced off the road, drained of fuel, and set ablaze.

Back in Germany, Manstein met Hitler and demanded that First Panzer Army be allowed freedom of movement in order to break out. Even with such freedom, he added, Fourth Panzer Army would have to attack towards the encirclement, and currently lacked the strength to do so. It was imperative that reinforcements were sent to Raus. Hitler responded with equal vehemence. He told Manstein that there were no reinforcements available, and that despite receiving more reinforcements than any other army group, Manstein had frittered the troops away without any lasting benefit. The Führer then added that he blamed Manstein for the current crisis:

> Last autumn, he said, he had been told that the Dnepr would be held. Hardly had he given his reluctant approval for us to retire behind that river when the need for a further withdrawal had been announced on account of a breakthrough at Kiev. I retorted that things had been bound to turn out that way. *He* was the person who had detained our forces on the southern wing to hold the Donets and Dnepr areas instead of letting us strengthen our northern wing.[7]

Hitler added that it seemed that Army Group South was only interested in grandiose operations instead of following orders to hold onto territory. Finally, he advised Manstein that the reports of Soviet tank numbers submitted by Army Group South were simply not credible. Luftwaffe reconnaissance, he told the field marshal, had not found anywhere near as many. Manstein presumed that this last detail had come from Göring, who had frequently attempted to undermine him in the past.

Aware that time was of the essence, Manstein now spoke to General Rudolf Schmundt, head of the army's personnel department. He asked Schmundt to tell Hitler that there was no point in Manstein remaining in command of Army Group South unless the Führer approved of his plans. Later that afternoon, he received a signal from Busse, his chief of staff. Hube had contacted Army Group South headquarters and again requested permission to break out towards the south rather than the west. When Hitler met Manstein again that evening, the mood was far different from the confrontational discussion of earlier in the day. To Manstein's surprise, Hitler told him that two new SS divisions and two infantry divisions would be assigned temporarily to Fourth Panzer Army. There would thus be sufficient forces for Raus to attack towards the encirclement. The insistence that First Panzer Army should continue to hold its current positions was also withdrawn.

It was all that Manstein could have hoped for, and he took the opportunity to press for more. It had been a repeated criticism that Hitler failed to follow the basic rules of the German general staff and did not give clear strategic and operational objectives to his subordinates, and Manstein now submitted his own suggestion. The role of Army Group South should be to stabilise the front line south of the Pripet Marshes, and to that end the Hungarian First Army should move immediately to Stryj, in order to guard the region between the Carpathians and the upper Dniester valley. As it was effectively cut off from Army Group South, Eighth Army should now be assigned to Army Group A. It would be possible to prevent the Red Army from exploiting the gap between Army Group South and Army Group A by blocking the Carpathian passes, but it was nevertheless important for both army groups to be under unified command. Drawing on successful arrangements that had prevailed in the region in the First World War when German and Austro-Hungarian forces had been operating against Russia, Manstein suggested that Marshal Ion Antonescu, the Romanian head of state and commander of Romanian forces, should take this role with a German chief of staff. Hitler listened silently, but rejected this proposal. Antonescu, he advised Manstein, would reject it on political grounds.

Manstein returned to the Eastern Front, meeting Raus to discuss the planned attack by Fourth Panzer Army. Raus had already received some reinforcements. The newly raised 359th Infantry Division consisted largely of youths aged 17 or 18, but at least it was comparatively strong in numbers, and reinforced by an assault gun battalion it had been dispatched in an attack towards the north. It made steady progress at first, but the Red Army had spent the intervening days bringing forward much-needed supplies and reinforcements and counterattacked on 21 March, rapidly breaking up the inexperienced German division. Much of the division retreated into Tarnopol, and Raus now informed Manstein that the city – almost inevitably declared a fortress by Hitler – was surrounded.

One of the Soviet units marching towards Tarnopol was 322nd Rifle Division, commanded by Colonel Petr Nikolaevich Lashchenko. His description of the difficulties faced by his men matches that of German accounts:

> We were deeply troubled that when we moved along the rural roads in two parallel columns from Belogorye, everyone waded knee-deep through thick, almost impassable mud. Black as tar and heavy as lead, it clung to our boots and overcoats in thick lumps, draining our strength … In addition to personal weapons and coat, gas mask, entrenching tool and a pack with dry rations and personal possessions, each soldier had additional grenades and ammunition in case the supply wagons fell behind and we had to fight for a prolonged period without any expectation of quick replenishment. We were weighed down, barely able to pull our feet out of the sticky mess to take the next step. We had to walk 14 or more hours per day, unable to sit on a dry spot, take a breath, rewind our footcloths, let alone get dry boots and clothes or recover with hot food or a couple

of hours' sleep in warm conditions. We mostly ate dry rations and slept briefly on the wet ground under the open sky …

During the first three river crossings … the soldiers were still coming across the vehicles, guns and wagons of leading units … Then the roads finally disintegrated and wheeled transport couldn't move. Now, guns and cars had to be extracted from potholes and quagmires and dragged to the nearest sections of highway by our few badly worn tractors. But as soon as the wagons and artillery reached the roads, the struggle resumed.

The route along which we moved ran through a series of low ridges and was crossed by ravines, which were now completely awash with melt water. The bridges over the brooks and rivulets, which had burst their banks, were frequently wrecked by the tanks that had passed the day before. Consequently drivers and riders, gunners and mortar teams, had to cut across country to wade through the streams. It often happened that a gun or wagon would descend into a ravine and become stuck. The horses were then unhitched and moved away to the nearest high ground with the men's belongings … and the men then pushed the guns and carts themselves. After descending into the next dip, the same thing would soon recur.

At night, the temperature fell sharply. Wet, filthy overcoats and padded jackets were covered with a crust of ice, hampering our movements, penetrating our bodies with cold. Clusters of icicles hung from the horses' manes and tails … Black ice covered the guns, the foot boards on the sides of vehicles, and the soldiers' equipment, as if everything had been dipped into a dirty icy font.

I recall an incident near Zbarazh [about ten miles northeast of Tarnopol]. On that morning, I ordered Timofeev [one of the regimental commanders] to bypass the town to surround and destroy the Nazis, preventing them from withdrawing to Tarnopol. To achieve this, 1085th Regiment … moved straight through the fields and undergrowth, bypassing a fortified position to their left. About three hours later, the soldiers descended into a deep ravine that blocked their way and were stuck there until evening. When the earth was shrouded in frosty mist, the dirt that stuck to the men hardened into a shell. Somehow, the soldiers got out of the ravine with their personal weapons, but all the regiment's artillery and wagon train remained stranded.

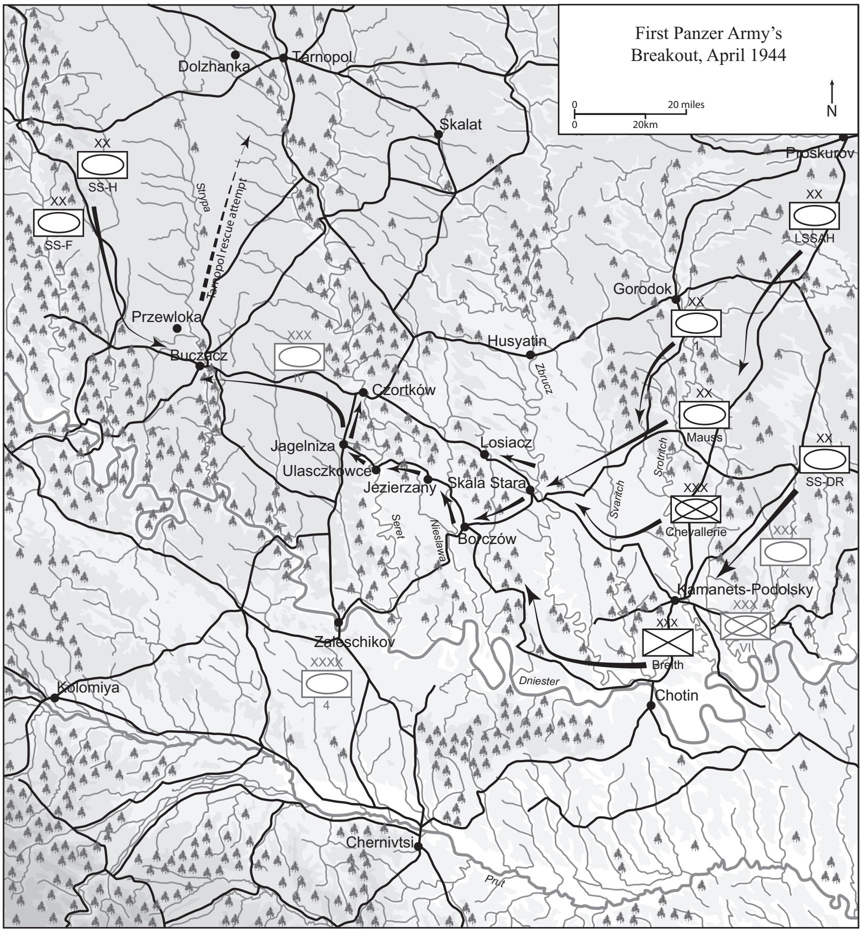
Staggering with fatigue, Timofeev once more led his men into the wretched ravine. The wagons were unloaded and artillery horses unhitched, and they dragged everything up by the next morning. They gathered in gloomy silence: everyone was utterly exhausted and couldn't move at all.

> At that moment I reached the place where Timofeev was stuck. Although I realised at first glance what had happened, I nonetheless began to reprimand him for the delay – having guessed our intentions, the Nazis withdrew from Zbarazh unhindered and joined the Tarnopol garrison. But when I looked at Pyotr Klementevich's face, I abruptly stopped in mid-sentence. His eyes were full of tears. A brave and diligent officer, hardened by adversity, he was aware of the justice of my reproaches but it was not his fault – the conditions were beyond human endurance.[8]

Before he left Hitler's headquarters, Manstein had sent a signal to Hube giving clear orders that the breakout operation was to be towards the west. Despite this direction not being his preferred route, Hube acted with characteristic vigour. The breakout involved First Panzer Army functioning as several different units. The attack to the west would be in two columns. In the north would be *Korpsgruppe Chevallerie*, and *Korpsgruppe Breith* would operate to its south. At the same time, a rearguard would attempt to prevent the encirclement being collapsed from the east. First Panzer Army would operate as a 'wandering pocket', retreating on its eastern flank as it advanced towards the west. It would be essential for all units to remain in contact during the operation.

Hube's first orders had already been dispatched to his formations on 24 March, but these were revised twice over the following two days. *Gruppe Mauss*, formed largely from 7th Panzer Division, was still operating on its own to the north and was now ordered to retreat south in order to link up with *Korpsgruppe Chevallerie*; its remaining tanks would be vital if the breakout was to succeed. One of Manstein's objections to a breakout to the south was on the grounds that First Panzer Army lacked sufficient bridging equipment, but the planned escape to the west would also involve the crossing of several rivers. These were smaller than the Dniester, but each was sufficient to bring the breakout to a standstill if bridges weren't secured. The first river was the Srotritch, running south past Gorodok to the Dniester, and several crossings south of Gorodok remained in German hands, but to the west were the Svaritch, Zbrucz, Nieslava, Seret and Strypa. Several smaller streams and rivers were also in the path of the breakout, and many of the waterways ran in narrow, steep-sided, patchily forested valleys. Even with only modest Soviet forces in the area, a successful breakout would not be easy.

Elements of *SS-Das Reich* were with First Panzer Army's rearguard. As the movement to the west began, the SS troops pulled out of the town of Bar, 55 miles (89km) northeast of Kamanets-Podolski. There was little sense of a formal front line, with units from both sides often passing through villages and



First Panzer Army's Breakout, April 1944

0
20 miles
0
20km
N
Dolzhanka
Tarnopol
Skalat
Proskurov
XX
SS-H
XX
SS-F
Strypa
Tarnopol rescue attempt
Przewloka
Buczacz
XXX
IV
Czortków
Husyatin
Zbrucz
Gorodok
XX
1
XX
LSSAH
XX
Mauss
XX
SS-DR
Jagelniza
Ulasczkowce
Jezierzany
Losiacz
Skala Stara
Svaritch
Srotritch
XXX
Chevallerie
Seret
Nieslawa
Borczów
XXX
X
Kamanets-Podolsky
XXX
VI
XXX
Breith
Zaleschikov
XXXX
4
Dniester
Chotin
Kolomiya
Chernivtsi
Prut

towns with no awareness of the presence of their enemies. Obersturmbannführer Hentschel, the division's signals officer, described the withdrawal:

> During the withdrawal of the vehicles, it fell to the signallers to try to bring the valuable radio vehicles out of Bar along the main road with the remaining combat vehicles.
>
> By midnight the town of Bar was to be the front line and all vehicles were to be evacuated by then. At 0200 we were still wedged in with a load of other vehicles in the town. It was finally at dawn that there was some movement of the column.

We were able to leave the town. More or less without leadership, trucks, tractors and above all horse-drawn vehicles tried to make their way to the southwest.

At 0800 all movement came to a halt. We could hear shots and an explosion. I went forward along the halted column on foot. The Russians had blocked the road. The enemy had taken up positions on an embankment, partly amongst some overturned vehicles. They fired on the road with anti-tank guns and mortars. An 8-ton tractor was ablaze, next to it a car. A Luftwaffe major, wearing a Knight's Cross, lay dead next to them. The leading vehicles had all been abandoned. The drivers and crews had taken cover in some woodland next to the road. Many were already talking about surrender. But when they heard that all the remaining combat vehicles of the *SS-Das Reich* battlegroup were in the column, they cleared the road and our eight-wheeled radio vehicle, albeit armed with just a machine-gun, took the lead position. The signallers seized rifles and worked forward next to the road.

There was also a Pz.IV commanded by Hauptsturmführer Burmester in the battlegroup's column. I deployed this tank to advance to the right of the road. A battery of infantry howitzers supported us with direct fire on the railway embankment. We were thus able to clear the way over the embankment.

Nevertheless, the junction of the road and the embankment remained under heavy fire. Our tank had only just crossed the railway embankment on the road when the vehicle column set off again in a panic. As a result there were numerous losses from Russian fire. We moved our vehicles forward in stages to a hill by a village. For the vehicles in front of us, it was a trap. We heard wild gunfire. There were no more vehicles to be seen on the road that led to the village. We wanted to pass through the village as it was already late afternoon, and we turned onto a relatively firm field road. But things grew worse. The first vehicle was soon bogged down. We tried to pull it free with the Pz.IV. But our attempt at evasion didn't remain hidden from the Russians. We were brought under fire and ever more vehicles became stuck. The first radio vehicle was shot up.

With a heavy heart I had to decide to abandon the immobile vehicles that were under enemy fire. The most important documents were put in the Pz.IV, which also took four or five of our wounded and the battlegroup doctor, Hauptsturmbannführer Fuchs. It was particularly hard for us when we had to put demolition charges on our eight-wheeled radio vehicle. The commander's Horch was also lost. We set off on foot and during the following night we rejoined the battlegroup. We took with us a female army assistant who had been left in the hospital in Proskurov.[9]

Whilst the rearguard was abandoning Bar and the neighbouring area, the columns moving west crossed the Svaritch, and Hube ordered them to move on across the Zbrucz, Nieslava, and Seret. At Skala Stara on the Zbrucz, 7th Panzer Division was holding a difficult position in anticipation of the arrival of *Korpsgruppe Chevallerie*; it took two days for the column to reach the river, by which time 7th Panzer Division had been driven out of its positions to the west of the river. A further advance to the west would require the recapture of the town. The columns moving west continued to struggle on poor roads and were still constantly hindered by stragglers and rear area units. Some of these stragglers showed little desire to fight and tried to slip away if they were gathered together by officers into ad hoc units, and on 27 March Hube felt it necessary to issue another general order:

> Any soldier who disobeys orders or who refuses to fight while he still has a weapon is as much our enemy as any Russian and must be treated as such by all commanders … the fate of the Führer's most famed army is at stake.[10]

After several days of mud and rain, the weather turned colder on 28 March. The day dawned frosty, and the firmer ground allowed both sides to move with less difficulty. *Gruppe Maus* and 1st Panzer Division, both of which had been effectively cut off for several days, managed to link up with *Korpsgruppe Chevallerie*; perhaps more important was the capture of a Red Army supply convoy, giving the group a welcome boost of fuel. To the south, *Korpsgruppe Breith* was a little further east, with the bulk of its troops around Kamanets-Podolski, which had previously been the headquarters of First Panzer Army. The city had been captured by the Soviet X Tank Corps and VI Mechanised Corps, but the airfield on the outskirts remained in German hands, a vital link with the outside world.

The forces with which Raus would make his relief attempt were beginning to arrive. The two SS formations were relatively new units. Like all SS divisions, they had both a numerical categorisation and a name. *SS-Hohenstaufen*, or 9th SS Panzer Division, and *SS-Frundsberg*, or 10th SS Panzer Division, had been raised the previous year. Originally, *SS-Hohenstaufen* was to be a panzergrenadier division, but it was converted to a full panzer division during its formation in France. The commander of *SS-Hohenstaufen* was Obergruppenführer Wilhelm Bittrich. He had been a fighter pilot in the First World War and was an early adherent to the Nazis. He served as chief of staff in *LSSAH* during the invasion of Poland in 1939, and led 8th SS Cavalry Division *Florian Geyer* before taking command of *SS-Hohenstaufen*. In 1942 he helped draw up German policies on how to deal with partisans on the Eastern Front. These policies, which included collective punishment against villages suspected of aiding partisans and arbitrary punishment – including execution – of families of suspected partisans, were carried out by his cavalry units in the central region of the Eastern Front, though the scale of such killings was greater after Bittrich had left the division.[11] It is worth mentioning that later in the war, Bittrich initiated the prosecution of officers who had ordered the execution of 17 members of the French Resistance, and no evidence was produced after the war showing that he had personally ordered any such killings, either in France or the Eastern Front. Nevertheless, as commander of SS cavalry units involved predominantly in anti-partisan operations, he must have been aware of what his units were doing, and it seems that he never considered taking any disciplinary action against those responsible for arbitrary killings of Soviet citizens.

The second division assigned to Fourth Panzer Army, *SS-Frundsberg*, was under the command of Gruppenführer Karl von Fischer-Treuenfeld. A staff officer on Ludendorff's staff in the First World War, he blamed the Jews for the economic turmoil that led to the crash of 1929 in which his business collapsed and he spent the first months of the war against the Soviet Union commanding a brigade of SS troops in the rear area, operating mainly against partisans or aiding the mass arrest and killing of Jews. He was head of police and SS units in the Protectorate of Moravia – part of what is now the Czech Republic – and was in charge of the troops that surrounded St Cyril and Methodius Cathedral in Prague when the assassins of Reinhard Heydrich, the Acting Reich Protector, were cornered. In his police role, he fell foul of the overlapping hierarchies of the Nazi state when he attempted to impose his will on the local Gestapo; he was transferred back to the Eastern Front, where he oversaw SS and police activities in Ukraine. Bittrich had served briefly in the infantry in the First World War before he became a fighter pilot, but both men's experience of ground warfare – at least in the front line – was very limited, and they had no previous experience of armoured operations.

The two divisions were grouped together as II SS Panzer Corps. The corps commander was a veteran of the Eastern Front, Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser. He had commanded the SS Panzer Corps that took part in the fighting around Kharkov in early 1943 and at the Battle of Kursk before he and his corps headquarters were transferred to Italy. He at least had some experience both of front-line warfare and fighting with armoured units.

Even while these commanders and their units were arriving in Galicia, events took a new turn. Relations between Hitler and Manstein had been deteriorating steadily ever since the end of the Battle of Kursk, and early on 30 March Hitler's personal aircraft landed at Lviv with instructions for Manstein to travel to Obersalzburg. Kleist, the commander of Army Group A, was already aboard the plane, and the two men can have had little doubt what awaited them. Zeitzler, chief of staff of *OKH*, told them shortly after they landed that Hitler was going to dismiss them; Zeitzler added that when Hitler had informed him of this, he had submitted his own resignation, which Hitler had rejected angrily. Manstein met Hitler shortly after:

> After handing me the Swords to my Knight's Cross, [Hitler] announced that he had decided to place the army group in other hands (Model's), as the time for grand-style operations in the east, for which I had been particularly qualified, were now past. All that counted now, he said, was to cling stubbornly to what we had. This new type of leadership must be inaugurated under a new name and a new symbol. Hence the change in the command of the army group, whose name he also intended to alter.
>
> … For the tasks now pending there he considered Model, who had stopped a difficult retreat in Army Group North, to be especially suitable …
>
> In reply, I told the Führer that I naturally could not object if he thought he would be able to work better with another army group commander in the present situation. Furthermore, I did not think any great harm would be done by my handing over to Model now, as the decisions regarding the release of First Panzer Army had already been taken … By and large, I said, this largely concluded what the army group had to do at the moment. Its only remaining commitment was to assist the fighting troops and give them moral support. That Model would certainly be able to do.
>
> The Führer emphatically agreed that Model was a particularly suitable choice in this respect, as he would 'dash round the divisions' and get the very utmost out of the troops. To this I retorted that the army group's divisions had long been giving of their best under my command and that no one else could get them to give anything more.[12]

It was an appropriately sharp end to their relationship. Manstein returned to his headquarters to oversee matters until Model arrived and to say farewell to his staff, most of whom requested transfers to other commands:

> I … had to take leave of my staff, and was not alone in finding the parting a hard one. These comrades-in-arms had accompanied me through the victorious Crimea battles; they had lived to see the eventual success of that arduous winter

> campaign of 1942–1943; and they had stood beside me throughout the critical months of 1943 and 1944. It was deeply gratifying to know how close our mutual trust had grown in those years and what genuine sorrow they felt now that our work together was finished. I feel entitled to say the same of the army commanders who had served under me.[13]

The relationship between Hitler and Manstein had never been cordial or easy. Many of Manstein's contemporaries found him difficult, and it is unsurprising that, lacking any training in operational matters or any military experience beyond his time as a corporal in the Kaiser's army, Hitler was at first awed, and then increasingly exasperated, by the knowledge of complex matters that his subordinate showed. As he returned to Germany, Manstein contemplated future challenges; it had been suggested that he might replace the elderly Rundstedt in the west. He had long been troubled by a cataract and underwent surgery in Germany, developing a postoperative infection that threatened to cost him his eyesight. Rundstedt was dismissed in July 1944, but Manstein was disappointed to learn that Field Marshal Günther von Kluge, who had previously commanded Army Group Centre and had been recovering from injuries sustained in a car accident, was appointed as the new commander in the west. When Kluge committed suicide in the aftermath of the July Plot, Manstein was again overlooked and Rundstedt was re-appointed. Alerted to the imminent assassination attempt, Manstein ensured that he was safely out of the way in a Baltic resort when Stauffenberg placed his bomb in Hitler's conference room. Although like many other senior officers he came under suspicion in the weeks that followed the attempt, he was not arrested.

Manstein made one last attempt to contact Hitler, in late January 1945. He visited the Reich Chancellery without a prior appointment, but after waiting for 30 minutes he was sent away. The intended purpose of the meeting remains unknown. He became a prisoner of the Western Allies after the war, and in the proceedings in Nuremberg he was a leading proponent of the 'clean Wehrmacht' myth – that atrocities were the fault of the SS and others, and ordinary German soldiers had simply done their duty. In 1949, he was placed on trial on 17 separate charges. All but three of these related to his time on the Eastern Front and included collaboration with SS *Einsatzgruppen*, mistreatment of prisoners of war, and ordering the destruction of civilian infrastructure during the retreat across Ukraine in 1943. Although Manstein denied knowledge of the atrocities committed in areas under his control, documentary evidence was produced showing that he had received regular reports listing killings and other crimes, and that contrary to his testimony that he had refused to obey Hitler's directive demanding the immediate execution of suspected commissars, he had personally issued orders reiterating and reinforcing this directive. He was found guilty of nine charges and sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment. This was reduced to 12 years, and he was released in 1953 after pressure from many sources, including Churchill and other western figures. He died in 1973.

Manstein is widely regarded as perhaps the finest general produced by any nation during the Second World War. He played a key role in the revolutionary design of the German campaign in the west in May 1940, and he led troops with distinction in France during the fighting that followed Dunkirk. His command of a motorised corps – later renamed a panzer corps – in Army Group North during the invasion of the Soviet Union was skilful, and his careful conquest of Crimea was an undoubted success; although his Eleventh Army suffered heavy losses in the fighting, the fortress of Sevastopol, reputedly one of the strongest fortresses in the world, was captured at the culmination of the campaign. His greatest moment came in the aftermath of the Stalingrad encirclement when he conducted a masterful counteroffensive, but thereafter he oversaw repeated setbacks. The attack on the Kursk salient originated with him, but he had wished to make the attack sooner, before the Red Army had recovered from the spring fighting, and his suggestions for alternatives – an attack into the salient from the west, or better still the famous 'backhand blow' which called for the temporary abandonment of central Ukraine, followed by an attack from the northwest towards the southeast into the flank of Soviet forces advancing towards the Dnepr – were rejected by Hitler. He rightly criticised Hitler for failing to set operational or strategic objectives and for interfering too much in details, but his memoirs – a relatively dry account of military matters – betray perhaps his biggest flaw. He described how, in late 1943, he still believed that it was possible for the Red Army to be fought to a standstill, after which a negotiated peace might be possible, but this was nearly a year after the Allied Powers had declared that they would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender and would not negotiate with Hitler. The anti-Hitler conspirators approached him several times, but he resolutely refused to help them – but nor did he betray any of them. He must have known that Germany would never be able to achieve a negotiated peace with Hitler in power, and it is arguable that, had he thrown his weight behind the conspirators, other senior officers might have followed. His argument that such a policy would have resulted in chaos and the collapse of the army with resultant defeat is probably correct, but such collapse and defeat was inevitable with Hitler in power, and again, Manstein must have been aware that unless

Hitler was removed, such a disastrous end was inevitable. An earlier collapse would have saved tens of thousands of lives, and his unwillingness to face this is perhaps the biggest blemish on his record.

The other field marshal to be sacked by Hitler was Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist, the commander of Army Group A. He has featured only in passing in this narrative, and indeed most accounts of the Second World War give him relatively little attention; his record suggests that this is unfair. He may have exasperated Guderian in trying to hold back the panzer divisions that raced towards the English Channel in 1940, but he was not alone in showing such caution, and he rapidly learned how to use the striking power of the panzer arm to best effect. The high point of his career probably came when he led First Panzer Army towards the Caucasus oilfields, and his failure to capture them is a reflection on the military realities on the ground rather than any lack of ability on his part – the thrust towards the Caucasus Mountains was predicated upon the comprehensive defeat of the Red Army and a strong German presence on the lower Volga, and the attempt to establish the latter at Stalingrad rapidly demonstrated that the former was far from being achieved.

Much like Manstein, Kleist had repeatedly angered Hitler during 1943 by requesting permission for withdrawals to the west, and it was therefore little surprise that he was now dismissed, though like Manstein he was awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross. He was officially placed in the 'Führer Reserve', but he would have known that there was little chance of a further recall to service. His cousin Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin was arrested for involvement in the July Plot and later executed, and Kleist too was arrested, though he was released through lack of evidence. It is certainly possible that he was a member of the conspiracy, as he had made no secret of his strong dislike of the Nazis. Perhaps the most striking aspect of his career was his refusal to tolerate misconduct in areas under his control. He clashed with SS commanders and other occupation authorities, threatening to arrest anyone attempting to carry out the sort of mass killings that were so common elsewhere on the Eastern Front. He realised very early in the invasion of the Soviet Union that victory was only possible with the support of the civilian population, writing in September 1942:

> These vast spaces depress me. And these vast hordes of people! We're lost if we don't win them over.[14]

He did a great deal to try to recruit genuinely voluntary helpers for the German forces, and as a result about 850,000 men from the Soviet Union joined the

German cause.[15] He ignored the protests of civilian authorities like Gauleiter Erich Koch, *Reichskommissar* for Ukraine and Fritz Sauckel, *Generalbevollmächtigter für den Arbeitseinsatz* ('General Plenipotentiary for Labour Redeployment', effectively in charge of forcible deportations of slave labour), and summoned SS and police commanders to his headquarters, telling them bluntly that any mistreatment or mass killing in his area would not be tolerated and any officer ordering such acts would be arrested and executed. When one SS officer retorted that the Führer would take a dim view of this, Kleist replied that this would be of little consolation to the SS officer, as he would already have been executed.[16]

After his release from prison in late 1944, Kleist spent the last months of the war in Bavaria, where he was taken prisoner by American forces in April 1945, and then handed over to the British. They in turn passed him to the Yugoslav government where he faced charges of war crimes committed during the invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941. Although no evidence was presented showing that he had ordered any such crimes, he was condemned for the conduct of his troops and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. Worse was to come. Two years later, he was extradited to the Soviet Union where he was convicted of the crime of 'alienating through mildness and kindness the population of the Soviet Union'.[17] It was an extraordinary charge, and he was moved from one prison to another and denied any contact with his family. Finally, in March 1954, he was transferred to a prison camp near Vladimir, 110 miles east of Moscow, where he was held with other senior officers. He was now permitted to write one postcard per month to his family. He died shortly after. It was a sad and undeserved end for a man who had done more than any of his contemporaries to prevent Nazi authorities from carrying out atrocities on the occupied regions of the Soviet Union, and who adhered to a traditional Prussian moral code that others quietly ignored.

The replacements for Manstein and Kleist were very different from their predecessors. Field Marshal Walter Model had no family tradition of military service, but voluntarily joined the army before the First World War. He held the rank of lieutenant in 1914 and had already established a reputation of being outspoken, with few personal friends amongst his contemporaries. In the years following the fall of the Kaiser he showed more characteristics that would stay with him, unhesitatingly obeying orders to suppress Communist strikers and others who might oppose the government. His bluntness proved to be an obstacle when he became chief of staff of IV Corps in 1938; far from ensuring the smooth running and cooperation of the subordinate units of the corps, his impatience and lack of tact made him deeply unpopular. Despite this, he continued to rise through the ranks, taking command of 3rd Panzer Division in November 1940.

The rank and file admired him for his forcefulness and his willingness to share their hardships, but his fellow officers largely detested him. When he took command of XLI Panzer Corps in October 1941, almost all of the staff officers of the corps requested transfers.

His next command was Ninth Army, which he led during the defensive fighting of late 1942. He showed great skill in the aggressive use of counterattacks to defeat Soviet penetrations of his defences and, provided sufficient reserves were available, was able to hold his positions while inflicting heavy losses on the opposing forces. It is a measure of the manner in which the Wehrmacht had stopped learning from experience that there was little by way of any systematic attempt to disseminate his experiences and techniques to other commanders. He had already caught Hitler's eye and the Führer showed great confidence in him, allowing Model more leeway than others when it came to making short-term tactical withdrawals in order to release the reserves that could then be used in a counterattack. In 1943, Model's Ninth Army was to form the northern pincer of the attack on the Kursk salient and the repeated delays in the start date were at least partly due to his requests for more time to prepare. He was unenthusiastic about the operation from the start and anticipated correctly that the Red Army would attack his eastern flank once his troops were committed; consequently, he held back sufficient reserves to deal with this counteroffensive, but perhaps at the cost of dooming the northern attack on the Kursk salient to failure.

In November 1943 Model was sent on leave, and it is possible, if not likely, that Hitler intended to replace Manstein with Model before the end of the year. Instead, he was sent to take command of Army Group North, which was in full retreat from its positions near Leningrad. He succeeded in bringing this retreat to a halt and was hailed as a great defensive genius, particularly at a time when Hitler was demanding that all of his commanders showed greater resolve in stubborn defence. But closer analysis of the situation suggests that the manner in which the Red Army was brought to a halt at the Estonian border owed little to brilliant generalship and rather more to practical reality. The region contained few roads and railway lines that the Red Army could use for logistic support and this was further exacerbated by the widespread destruction of such infrastructure by the retreating Germans. Before the retreat, Army Group held about 650 miles of front line; when Model was credited with bringing the retreat to a halt, the new front line was just 430 miles, and 140 miles of this new front line consisted of Lake Peipus and Lake Pskov – even after allowing for substantial losses, the new position was far more in proportion to the resources available. It was from this command that he was sent south to replace Manstein, and given the manner in which staff officers preferred to request transfers rather than work for him in 1941, it seems likely that the manner in which Manstein's former staff did likewise was due to the personality of their new commander.

Kleist's replacement was another personal favourite of Hitler, Generaloberst Ferdinand Schörner. He was a physically intimidating figure and had been awarded the *Pour le Mérite* in the First World War for personal bravery. Despite taking part in the suppression of Hitler's 'Beer Hall Putsch' of 1923, he had strong right-wing tendencies and sympathised with the Nazi Party, though he did not become a member of the party until 1943. He commanded a mountain regiment in the invasion of Poland and a mountain division in the attack on Greece in 1941, and then led the same division in the invasion of the Soviet Union as part of XIX Mountain Corps, attacking from Finland. He took command of the corps in 1942 and was involved in inconclusive attempts to capture Murmansk; when the Red Army counterattacked, he conducted a successful defence, earning Hitler's approval. In late 1943 he was sent to Ukraine to lead XL Panzer Corps. He had already established a reputation for ruthless discipline and this came to the fore in his new post; the Soviet attacks on his sector of the front line, particularly the bridgehead at Nikopol, lacked imagination and were defeated with comparative ease, but at a time when Hitler was growing increasingly exasperated with Manstein's constant withdrawals, Schörner's harsh orders demanding severe punishment of any officer or soldier who attempted to retreat seemed precisely what the Führer needed. It should also be pointed out that, like Model, Schörner was able to use his strong personal relationship with Hitler to good effect, allowing him a degree of flexibility denied to other commanders. As will be described later, he was sent to Crimea to take command of Seventeenth Army, and it was from this post that he was appointed to replace Kleist. Some German senior commanders like Erwin Rommel and Hermann Hoth were genuinely popular with their subordinates at every level; others like Manstein were often regarded as somewhat distant and cold, but nevertheless were held in great respect, and some like Model might have been unpopular with officers of a similar rank but were popular with ordinary soldiers. In the case of Schörner, he was widely disliked by contemporaries and front-line soldiers alike. Some ordinary soldiers approved of Schörner's harshness on rear area units; like combat personnel in almost every army in history, the fighters of the Wehrmacht generally held the 'soft' men of the rear area in contempt and therefore approved of the manner in which Schörner repeatedly 'combed out' such formations in order to send reinforcements to the front line. However, many men detested him for what often seemed unnecessary and arbitrary harshness.

Hube's chief of staff at First Panzer Army until the eve of the latest Soviet offensive, Walther Wenck, was one of the rising stars of the Wehrmacht. Hube gave him a glowing report when he recommended his promotion to Generalleutnant:

> [He is] a staff officer who is far above average, and who gives superior service in all situations. [He has a] very strong, decisive, utterly robust personality. With his unusually fresh, confident manner, he has a most invigorating and energising effect on subordinate commanders. He deserves to be singled out for his character and accomplishment as a top performer.[18]

Wenck left First Panzer Army before the Soviet assault began in March; after being promoted at the beginning of April, he returned to the Eastern Front as chief of staff to Schörner. For a few brief days he worked with Kleist before the latter's departure and then with Schörner. In all the posts he had held prior to this, Wenck had established a close and friendly relationship with his commanding officer, but like so many others he found Schörner a difficult individual. Both Zeitzler and Hitler had impressed upon Schörner that he would have the very best chief of staff in the army, but trust grew slowly. Wenck later recalled that Schörner often left him in the dark about his movements and regularly briefed other staff officers before speaking to Wenck. When Wenck confronted him and asked him whether it might be better for a different chief of staff to be appointed, Schörner mended his ways.[19]

The changes in command were accompanied by changes both in name and makeup of the army groups. Manstein's former command was renamed Army Group North Ukraine and now consisted of Fourth Panzer Army, First Panzer Army, and the Hungarian First Army. Army Group A now became Army Group South Ukraine, gaining control of Eighth Army, and additionally was assigned the Romanian Fourth and Third Armies and the German Sixth Army. Seventeenth Army, stranded in Crimea, was also under Schörner's command.

Manstein relinquished his post with the consolation that he had done all he could to save First Panzer Army, but its escape was still not a certainty. Significantly, his otherwise detailed memoirs are silent about the causes of the widespread collapse of Army Group South, which resulted not only in the encirclement of First Panzer Army but also brought much of Army Group A close to destruction. It seems that the main obstacle faced by Hube's forces was a shortage of fuel rather than Soviet resistance, and on 31 March Hube signalled Army Group South that unless supplies improved, he would have to consider alternatives. He considered that there were two possibilities. The first, codenamed Lettow-Vorbeck after the commander of German forces in East Africa in the First World War, would see First Panzer Army divide into two parts. The panzer divisions leading *Gruppe Chevallerie* would continue to the west, while the rest of the army turned south and attempted to break out by crossing the Dniester and reaching Stanislau (now the city of Ivano-Frankivsk). The second, codenamed 'Mackensen' after the field marshal who led German troops on the Eastern Front and in the Balkans in the First World War, involved the entire army turning south.[20] These were both contrary to Manstein's instructions and wishes, and the staff at Army Group South did all they could to deliver more fuel to the 'wandering pocket'. Several transport planes delivered gasoline on 1 April, but shortages remained. The rearguard was forced to pull back through the airfield outside Kamanets-Podolski, the last major airstrip within the encirclement. Unable to secure sufficient fuel, *SS-Das Reich* was forced to abandon its last non-combatant vehicles near the airfield.[21] All now depended on the breakout succeeding.

The leading elements of *Gruppe Chevallerie* were now approaching Borczów, a town on the Nieslava. The river was smaller than some of the others in the path of First Panzer Army, but swollen by winter rain it was still a substantial obstacle. Aware that it was vital to link up with Fourth Panzer Army before fuel supplies ran out, General Kurt von der Chevallerie, who had commanded LIX Corps prior to the encirclement, concentrated the remaining resources of 1st, 16th and 19th Panzer Divisions in Skala Stara. Under the overall command of Generalmajor Hans-Ulrich Back, commander of 16th Panzer Division, this group was to push on to the Seret as soon as crossings over the Nieslava were secured. At this stage, 1st Panzer Division was down to just eight Pz.IVs and Panthers, all of which had been repaired several times, and the other two panzer divisions were in similar shape. Had any of the Soviet tank corps that had pushed south of the Dniester been available, it is possible, even likely, that the breakout would have been halted in its tracks. Even the limited Soviet units that were in the region would be a considerable obstacle, as 1st Panzer Division found when it set off for the Seret on 1 April. At first, progress was good and the Nieslava was crossed without great difficulty via road and rail bridges that were captured intact north of Borczów, but immediately to the east of Jezierzany, the leading elements of the division ran into a line of Soviet anti-tank guns. Hoping that the Red Army would not have had sufficient time to deploy infantry in strength along this line, the division immediately attacked the anti-tank *Pakfront* but failed to make any progress. A prisoner told the Germans that there were about 1,000 Soviet troops supported by 20 tanks in the village with artillery support from a battery a little to the west, and Marcks waited until the rest of the division had arrived before renewing his attack.

This second attack on Jezierzany was made primarily from the north in an attempt to outflank the Soviet defences, but once more the Germans were brought to a standstill by heavy fire. Finally, a weak panzergrenadier battalion – in reality, little more than a company in strength – penetrated into the village from the south. The last Pz.IV was destroyed as 1st Panzer Division continued fighting for the village into the night in a sudden, heavy snowstorm. Finally, the northern flank of the Soviet defences collapsed and Jezierzany was captured. The Germans claimed the capture of 26 anti-tank guns, 13 field guns, and assorted other equipment together with 50 prisoners. Nine T-34s were claimed destroyed; the rest disappeared into the darkness.[22] The road to the Seret was open.

A little to the north, *LSSAH* advanced from the Zbrucz to attack the village of Losiacz. On 3 April, the division advanced against the Soviet troops in the village, apparently taking them largely by surprise. Five assault guns, 14 heavy mortars, and five anti-tank guns were captured and immediately put to use, but fuel shortages meant that most of them were abandoned within a day.[23] With these two advances effectively covering the rest of *Gruppe Chevallerie*, the Germans moved forward in strength towards the Seret. Belatedly, the Red Army had realised that First Panzer Army was attempting to escape to the west rather than the south and had begun to move infantry into blocking positions; the leading elements of three Soviet rifle divisions were identified in sporadic fighting and were rapidly dispersed.

As had been the case in the encirclements at Stalingrad and Korsun, the Soviet troops attempted to induce the Germans to surrender and at least two different documents were dropped by air, the first on 1 April. These demanded that the surrounded men lay down their arms 'to bring pointless resistance to an end'. The leaflets listed the usual assurances of good treatment and a swift return to Germany at the end of the war, but – as had been the case in the previous encirclements – there is no evidence that any Germans were induced to surrender. Some German writers later claimed that the first leaflet had concluded with a threat that if resistance continued beyond 2 April, one in three of those who surrendered after that date would be executed, but no copies of the leaflet have survived to corroborate this claim.[24]

After its success at Jezierzany, 1st Panzer Division drove on to the Seret. The leading unit reached the river at dawn on 2 April at the village of Ulasczkowce, where advancing German troops had constructed a bridge in 1941, and was doubly delighted to find that the bridge was intact and there were no Soviet troops to be seen. As the Germans began to cross, a group of about 50 Soviet soldiers emerged from houses near the bridge and opened fire, but they were rapidly driven off.[25] The rest of *Gruppe Back* was directed to cross the river via the bridge as soon as possible, but news came of a response by the Red Army. Luftwaffe reconnaissance reported large numbers of Soviet tanks – estimated as between 70 and 80 – were heading for Czortków, immediately to the north of the bridgehead that 1st Panzer Division had established. Radio intercepts suggested that this force was the Soviet IV Tank Corps, and given that the entire tank strength of First Panzer Army amounted to fewer than 20 vehicles, there was a considerable risk that this Soviet force could bring the breakout to a halt and even drive it back, particularly if IV Tank Corps crossed the Seret to the east bank and then attacked into the exposed flank of *Gruppe Chevallerie*. Accordingly, Hube ordered Chevallerie to turn some of his forces north to deal with the threat. If possible, Czortków was to be captured, and every attempt was to be made to destroy the bridges in the town.

Accordingly, 1st Panzer Division's leading elements moved out of Ulasczkowce and seized the town of Jagelniza, a little to the east. Still engaged in running battles with small groups of Soviet forces, the rest of *Gruppe Back* slowly moved forward, and progress improved on 4 April when a hard frost firmed the ground, when the Germans began their attack on Czortków. *Gruppe Feig*, a mixed battlegroup with personnel from several divisions, set off before dawn and came under heavy Soviet fire before it reached the outskirts. Oberstleutnant Feig, the battlegroup commander, had been badly injured the previous November when he was stabbed while personally leading a reconnaissance patrol, but returned to his division as soon as he possibly could and was heavily involved in the attempts to reach the Korsun encirclement; in this latest attack, he sustained a badly broken ankle from the explosion of an artillery shell and was dragged to safety by his men. There was a pause while the Germans gathered their strength, and a second attack penetrated into the town and reached the southern bridge. Several more officers of the battlegroup were wounded, and the long-barrelled Pz.IVs and Panthers that accompanied the German panzergrenadiers found it difficult to operate effectively in the narrow streets. A Stuka attack on Soviet positions made little impact and fighting continued through the rest of the day. The southern bridge – a railway crossing – was destroyed in the early evening, and during the night a small group of combat engineers from 1st Panzer Division managed to infiltrate through to the other two bridges. These too were destroyed with demolition charges, but the lasting effect of these demolitions was doubtful

– the Seret was barely 20m wide in the centre of the town, and it wouldn't take the Red Army long to repair the crossings.[26]

While the leading elements of First Panzer Army fought for Czortków to the west of the Seret on 4 April, the rearguard crossed the Zbrucz under almost no pressure. There was great uncertainty of how far the Germans would have to continue before they made contact with Fourth Panzer Army; even Hube's headquarters had received little hard information. Hausser had assembled his troops in open ground near Lviv as they arrived, and was dismayed to see that many of the relatively young soldiers of the two SS divisions had deployed so quickly that most of the men lacked any winter clothing. The attack would be towards Buczacz, with *SS-Hohenstaufen* on the north and *SS-Frundsberg* to the south; the northern flank was to be protected by 100th *Jäger* Division, with 367th Infantry Division guarding the south. Raus had organised a column of supply vehicles, ready to drive through to Hube's army as soon as contact was established.

The initial attack by II SS Panzer Corps made encouraging progress, but the following day it almost came to a halt as the Germans struggled through mud and snow. The war diary of Fourth Panzer Army glumly recorded that, due to the 'extremely bad' road conditions and the destruction of several small bridges, the day's objectives had not been achieved.[27] On the same day, 6th Panzer Division moved towards Buczacz from the east. In order to avoid the risk of his units becoming too dispersed, particularly when fuel remained at an absolute premium, Chevallerie had been forced to hold back his leading elements while the rest of the group caught up, as Major Paul Stahl, commander of the division's 114th Panzergrenadier Regiment, later wrote:

> Naturally, we could never understand why, when enemy resistance had been overcome, a decisive pursuit and speedy advance was forbidden … I was angry that my division had been halted by strict orders in its attempts to advance. However, the pause had the merit of permitting my two comrades from the Panther Battalion and the artillery battalion to join me in a private reconnaissance during the afternoon [of 5 April], which led us to the conclusion that as soon as orders were given for a new attack on Buczacz, we would be able to carry them out and would be able to take the town by crossing the Strypa at a point unexpected by the enemy and attacking from the south and southwest in a night assault.[28]

During the day, a small quantity of fuel managed to reach First Panzer Army by airdrops, and this was distributed to the remaining combat vehicles. Early on

6 April, 6th Panzer Division moved against Buczacz. The initial attack was beaten off, but reconnaissance revealed a weakness in the Soviet defences to the south. Two companies of panzergrenadiers infiltrated along the west bank of the Strypa into the town, and by mid-morning Buczacz was in German hands. But where was II SS Panzer Corps? Stahl later described the mood that prevailed:

> Even in April 1944, there was great irritation amongst the ranks of 6th Panzer Division that most of the credit [for the final breakout] was given to II SS Panzer Corps. After my battlegroup captured Buczacz and the area was secured, I carried out reconnaissance to the west. This reconnaissance reported no enemy activity. During the following days, I had to deploy just one scouting party about 2km west of Buczacz. My division reported to me that I should be able to make contact to the west with the advancing SS armoured units.
>
> To that end, I sent the one remaining radio half-track to the northwest, where it ran into mines in open ground and was rendered immobile. I left it there as it could still transmit and would thus be able to advise the advancing SS panzer corps about the previously unknown minefield. The commander of *SS-Frundsberg*, an Obergruppenführer, and his escort appeared by this radio half-track and was directed to my command post in Buczacz. This very temperamental division commander, who apparently was experiencing his first front line post in the Second World War, as I could see from his medals, explained to me that his division, led by motorcyclists, was able to make only slow progress because of poor roads. In addition there were supply difficulties, particularly of fuel. This commander then returned to his troops the following day. I cannot remember receiving any communications about any combat activity by *SS-Frundsberg* from my reconnaissance patrols in the area west or northwest of Buczacz.[29]

The encounter marked the first link between First Panzer Army and the relief column. Fischer-Treuenfeld returned to his division and ordered its armoured battlegroup to proceed at full speed to Buczacz; despite reports of Soviet tanks on his northern flank in the village of Przewloka, Obersturmbannführer Franz Kleffner, commander of the battlegroup, reached Buczacz late in the day with about 18 tanks.

It took until 9 April for firm contact to be established. First Panzer Army was ordered to take up defensive positions facing east along the Seret, and some of its units were pulled out of line. *LSSAH* handed over its few remaining heavy weapons to other units and entrained for Belgium, where it was to be replenished and brought up to full strength again. Perhaps because the division carried

Hitler's name, it was given special treatment, as the movement order from *OKH* made clear:

> The Führer has ordered that the unit is to be given preference in refitting. All personnel and materiel necessary to that end are to be made available.[30]

Having sacked two field marshals in the preceding weeks, Hitler decided to mark the successful escape of First Panzer Army by presenting Hube with the diamonds to the Knight's Cross. Hube travelled to Germany where he met the Führer on 20 April for the presentation ceremony. It was rumoured that Hitler informed him that he would be given command of Army Group South Ukraine in the near future, but no records of his discussions with Hitler survive. The following day he boarded a Heinkel aircraft at an airfield near Salzburg. As it took off, the plane struck a tree with its wing and crashed. Hube and all the other occupants of the plane were killed.

Hube had started the war in a training post, taking command of an infantry regiment at the end of the conquest of Poland. He led 16th Infantry Division from June 1940 during the French campaign and then oversaw the transformation of his division into 16th Panzer Division, which he led into Ukraine in 1941. He distinguished himself in the early tank battles against the Red Army and particularly during the difficult battles of the first winter of the war against the Soviet Union, and perhaps the high point of his career came when he and 16th Panzer Division made a thrust from the Don bend near Kalach to the Volga just north of Stalingrad in the summer of 1942. That autumn he took command of XIV Panzer Corps and was flown out of the pocket to oversee improvements in the air bridge upon which the encircled Sixth Army was dependent. One of the first questions that he asked the staff officers of the Luftwaffe was whether it was possible to fly tanks into the encirclement. This showed a remarkable level of ignorance – it seems extraordinary that he could have risen to such a high rank in the panzer arm, and endured life in Stalingrad when all supplies had to be flown in, without being aware that the weight of a medium tank was ten times the maximum load of a transport aircraft. Although XIV Panzer Corps was destroyed in Stalingrad, Hube was given command of a new unit bearing the same name in Sicily before he returned to the Eastern Front to take command of First Panzer Army. He was popular with his men for his willingness to share their hardships and his personal courage – he lost an arm in 1914 and was badly gassed in 1918 but insisted on returning to front-line service on both occasions – but Manstein regarded him as having excessive faith in Hitler's judgement. It should be said that regardless of his unquestioning devotion to Hitler, he showed considerable skill in conducting the withdrawal of German forces from Sicily. He commanded First Panzer Army during a period when it was in almost constant retreat, and he had little opportunity to demonstrate any major skills or deficiencies in large-scale operations, with the breakout from Kamanets-Podolski being the exception. Although the breakout was ultimately successful, it should be remembered that on several occasions he requested permission to turn south rather than comply with Manstein's wishes for First Panzer Army to fight its way west and link up with Fourth Panzer Army. Chevallerie, who had led the northern group during the breakout of First Panzer Army, replaced Hube as army commander.

Accounts written by Soviet commanders of the encirclement of First Panzer Army – usually named after Kamanets-Podolski, which was the home of the army's headquarters at the moment it was encircled – refer to the battle almost in passing. Zhukov mentioned that he regretted not taking greater advantage of the opportunity that arose, while Konev was busy supervising the activities of his front further to the southeast. It is certainly arguable that the encircled forces were strong enough to fight their way out against whatever Soviet units could be deployed in their path, particularly given the appalling road conditions and the length of Soviet supply lines, but nevertheless, an opportunity to capture or destroy several German divisions was missed. German losses were substantial, with perhaps 45,000 men killed, wounded or taken prisoner, but Soviet losses were about 200,000. Much of First Panzer Army's heavy equipment was lost, and the loss of large numbers of non-combatant trucks and other vehicles in attempts to preserve fuel meant that the divisions that escaped were hamstrung by transport shortages for a considerable time. Restoring these divisions to full equipment levels diverted considerable resources that Hitler had intended for the formations preparing to face the Western Allies in France. But had Zhukov and Konev reacted faster and more decisively, it seems likely that the damage inflicted might have been even greater. Operating at the end of long supply lines over badly degraded roads, with all of their formations far from full strength, the Soviet armies involved in this battle were approaching the end of their strength. They still had sufficient power to break through the German lines and even to achieve this great encirclement, but the sheer scale of the encirclement ensured that the depleted Soviet divisions had little chance of establishing a robust ring. Perhaps the lack of attention to the battle in the memoirs of the Red Army's senior officers reflects their tacit recognition of this.

Hitler's *Führerbefehl 11* – which declared 29 locations as fortresses in March 1944 – was now reaping a bitter harvest. The purpose of the policy was questionable from the outset. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, there had been considerable attention devoted to the design and purpose of fortresses and many were constructed along the frontiers of European nations. The rapid development of artillery during the same era resulted in these fortresses being repeatedly modified, but despite this they proved to have little resilience when war began. They had been intended to act as breakwaters in the path of enemy advances, and in 1914 the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire allowed one of their largest fortresses – the city and surrounding fortifications of Przemyśl in southeast Poland – to be encircled twice, in the expectation that it would tie down substantial Russian forces. The reality proved to be very different. Although the Russians did divert considerable numbers of troops to the siege, there is little evidence that this made any difference to their ability to fight elsewhere, and the Austro-Hungarian forces felt obliged to make repeated attempts to break through to Przemyśl – and more than 100,000 troops who were trapped there – in order to lift the siege. This resulted in weeks of bloody warfare in the Carpathian Mountains in midwinter, with appalling casualties on both sides for no gain.

It is arguable that the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad tied down very considerable Soviet forces once it was encircled, and that had these troops been available to the Red Army, Manstein's recovery along the Mius-Donets line would not have been possible. But the price of this was huge, with the Wehrmacht losing irreplaceable troops in the process. Even if the new fortress policy was to have the same braking effect on Soviet attacks, the cost was perhaps more than the Wehrmacht could afford. The Tarnopol 'fortress' was arguably such a waste of German resources, but had the city been abandoned earlier, Soviet infantry would have been available to move south and block First Panzer Army's breakout.

Raus was aware that the troops in Tarnopol would be unable to put up prolonged resistance if the 'fortress' was encircled, and organised a relief column. The ostensible purpose was to deliver about 40 tons of supplies to the 'fortress', but the combat troops in the column were under strict orders not to become embroiled in the fighting in Tarnopol – they were to withdraw to the west as soon as the supplies had been delivered. Raus gave no orders regarding the garrison, and it is open to question whether he wished the city to be held with the intention of re-establishing the front line in this area, or whether he quietly expected the garrison to withdraw with the relief column.

Nor was Tarnopol the only fortress in Raus' area. A little to the north, the city of Brody had also been declared a fortress and the German front line was fragmentary at best. Using armoured units from 8th Panzer Division, Raus assembled a battlegroup in Złoczów (now Zolochiv) with the intention of first attacking to the north towards Brody, before turning towards Tarnopol. Whilst the garrison in Tarnopol could not be expected to hold out for long, it was particularly important to stop the onward drive of Soviet forces from the Brody region towards the west. Commanded by Oberst Werner Friebe, the battlegroup consisted of a panzer battalion, the division's reconnaissance battalion, a panzergrenadier battalion, and assorted troops from other units, including a small number of Tiger tanks. The attack towards Brody began on 21 March, as a panzergrenadier company commander later wrote:

> With our armoured group, we thrust past the spearheads of the Russian Third Guards Tank Army and brought the advance of this powerful enemy tank unit to a halt, thus hindering its advance towards Lemberg [Lviv]. Our tanks and assault guns, and our self-propelled anti-tank guns, shot up a number of the dangerous T-34s, while despite heavy anti-tank gunfire we destroyed the Russian infantry who were following, fighting mounted in our half-tracks. Towards evening we took up an all-round defensive position behind the Russian front line and were resupplied the following morning with ammunition, fuel and food by air.[31]

It was an encouraging start, but as the battlegroup pushed on to the north of Brody, it ran into increasing difficulty, from fuel shortages, increasing enemy defences, and heavy snow. Nevertheless, the danger of Brody becoming isolated had been eliminated, at least for the moment, and Friebe was able to return to Złoczów, from where he was to attack directly towards Tarnopol.

Tarnopol was encircled on 23 March, at almost the same moment that the tanks of 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts met south of the Dniester and completed their tenuous encirclement of First Panzer Army. Leading elements of the Red Army penetrated into Tarnopol on 9 March but were too weak to overcome the limited forces available to Generalmajor Egon von Neindorff, the local German commander. Had even modest reinforcements been available to the Soviet attackers, they would probably have overrun the city the following day, as Tarnopol had no fortifications – there hadn't been sufficient time even to dig trenches or erect anti-tank obstacles. German reinforcements in the shape of a battalion of assault guns arrived just in time and, supported by these, Neindorff's diminutive garrison mounted a successful counterattack, driving the Soviet units from the city.

The garrison of the city was weak, consisting of about 4,500 men. These included elements of 357th and 359th Infantry Divisions, a small group from *LSSAH*, and perhaps six or seven improvised battalions made up of rear area personnel and some personnel from 14th SS Division. This latter formation was termed a '*Freiwilligen*' ('Volunteer') division and originally carried the name '*Galizien*'; it was raised in late 1943 using ethnic Germans and a few Ukrainians mainly from the Lviv region, and had no combat experience. Food supplies were low, and Neindorff had little expectation of being able to hold out for long. The first major attack came the day after the encirclement and parts of the western suburbs were swiftly overrun, but the advance was brought to a halt with heavy losses on both sides. That evening, a Soviet emissary crossed the front line under a flag of truce to offer surrender terms. Neindorff sent him back without any response.

Friebe began his attack along the road from Złoczów to Tarnopol on 25 March. A line of Soviet anti-tank guns was swiftly overcome, but as they proceeded towards the east, the German armoured vehicles found their road had to cross a series of ridges. The Red Army had established anti-tank positions on almost every ridge, requiring the panzergrenadiers to dismount and fight their way through. Under constant fire from the north, Friebe had to leave a couple of companies to protect his open flank but was able to push on. By the end of the day, his leading elements were perhaps six miles (10km) from the outskirts of Tarnopol, but when the battlegroup tried to renew its attack the following day, it was impossible to make any progress. Friebe paused to regroup and ordered a fresh attempt. As they formed up, the Germans came under heavy air attack. The headquarters of the group tasked with the main attack was hit, resulting in the deaths of several officers. Friebe sent a grim report back to Raus:

> It was clear that a breakthrough to Tarnopol from the current preparation area would only be possible with heavy losses of personnel and materiel and would take considerable time … numerous tanks and half-tracks were stranded in the boggy terrain and had to be towed out … In recognition of this situation and in view of passing time, I decided at 1300 to break off the operation and pull back behind our front line with all mobile vehicles.[32]

Attacks continued against the Tarnopol garrison. Gradually, the perimeter shrank under heavy pressure, while additional Soviet units deployed to the west to block any further relief attempt. Supplies reached the garrison sporadically by airdrops, but Soviet anti-aircraft batteries forced the German planes to release from too high an altitude, with the result that most supply containers drifted down behind Soviet lines. Heavy artillery bombardment reduced most of the city to rubble, and by the end of March Neindorff's badly depleted garrison was almost out of ammunition. He sent a signal to higher commands seeking permission to attempt a breakout; Hitler's order that the city be held to the last man remained in place, and his request was rejected. Raus assured him that he would do everything he could to rescue him.

On 9 April, Fourth Panzer Army issued orders for a second relief attempt. Friebe's battlegroup would attack once more, under the aegis of Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps, which would also have *SS-Hohenstaufen* available. The attack was to be made from due west of Tarnopol and would need to cover about 12 miles (20km) to reach the city. *Kampfgruppe Friebe* had been in action once more in the Brody sector and its tired personnel lined up alongside the SS troops in heavy rain. The attack began on 11 April despite extremely poor ground conditions; Balck recorded that a military bridge over a small river almost disappeared into the mud. Nevertheless, the attackers struggled forward to a small village on a river perhaps halfway to their objective. Here the attack came to an abrupt halt. Unless a bridge could be secured, it would be impossible for the German armour to cross. In heavy fighting, troops from *SS-Hohenstaufen* secured a tiny bridgehead and laboured to construct such a bridge, but time was rapidly passing.

During these days, the Soviet troops encircling Tarnopol made repeated attacks, first at one point and then another. Many were beaten off by the defenders, with sporadic support from Stukas, but the perimeter continued to shrink. On 14 April, the German armour was finally able to cross the small river and struggled forward once again in the teeth of strong resistance. Nevertheless, there was now no major geographical obstacle in the path of the relief column. One more effort on 15 April might suffice to lift the siege. After waiting for fuel and ammunition, the assault was duly launched. Almost immediately it ran into strong defences and ground to a halt.

Time had run out for Neindorff and his garrison. Most of the city was now in Soviet hands and in renewed streetfighting, Neindorff was killed, with command of the greatly diminished garrison passing to Oberst Carl-August von Schönfeld, commander of a regiment from 359th Infantry Division. With only about 1,500 men left, ammunition and food almost exhausted, and out of contact with German forces elsewhere, Schönfeld met his officers that evening and ordered them to organise the surviving troops into two groups. They were to attempt a breakout to the southwest and west shortly after midnight. The attempt began well, with the Germans succeeding in breaking through the siege perimeter, but thereafter they rapidly became disordered as they encountered further Soviet troops. Lashchenko's rifle division was one of the Soviet units that attempted to intercept the garrison:

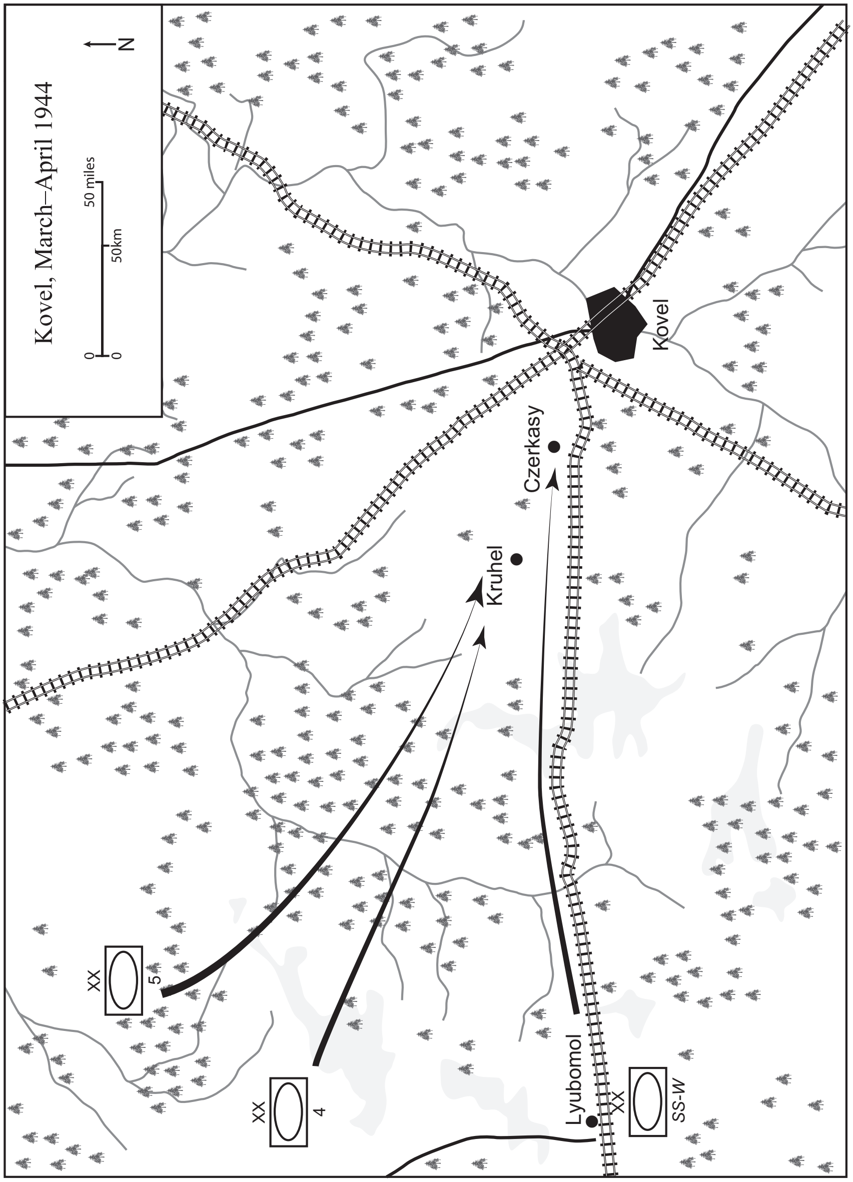
> The enemy silently left Tarnopol at night, in total darkness. He hoped that our watchfulness at that time would be low and he would be able to infiltrate past us and break through the encirclement. But these hopes were dashed.
>
> The vanguard company of 50–70 men approached the command post of my 322nd Rifle Division at about 3am in a ravine near the village of Dolzhanka. Two light machine-gun teams, protecting the command post, met the enemy with heavy fire. A few minutes later, all the personnel in the command post entered the battle, led by Colonel Korotkov. During the fierce clash the Nazis managed to capture two houses on the edge of Dolzhanka, occupied by division administration teams, but couldn't break through the ravine to the main part of our command post. Leaving their wounded in the ravine, the remnants of the vanguard tried to break through to the left, but they ran into the waiting anti-tank guns and were completely destroyed.
>
> An hour later, the enemy's main forces from this breakout met the same fate. Having struggled against machine-gun positions in the dark, the Nazis made a hopeless attempt to break through in a straight dash towards the west and almost all were killed in the hollows and ravines by machine-gun fire. In the grey pre-dawn light the survivors approached our trenches with their hands raised, several dozens of Fascist soldiers – all that remained of the many thousands of troops that once formed the Tarnopol garrison.
>
> A second group, which tried to break through the positions of 148th Rifle Division, was just as resolutely crushed.[33]

Schönfeld and other officers were killed, and ultimately fewer than 200 men managed to reach German lines in small groups. Shortly after, the Red Army opened a major attack on XLVIII Panzer Corps with VI Guards Tank Corps, reinforced by two rifle divisions. The deployment of *SS-Hohenstaufen* and *SS-Frundsberg* in Galicia had always been intended to be for as short a time as possible, in order to preserve the strength of the two divisions for operations against an expected invasion of France, and after discussions between Model and Raus, the two divisions were ordered to withdraw and prepare for transportation to the west. Before they did so, *SS-Frundsberg* was involved in further heavy fighting, in which its commander, Fischer-Treuenfeld, was badly wounded. Command of the division passed to Standartenführer Heinz Harmel.

On the northern flank of Fourth Panzer Army beyond Brody was another of Hitler's 'fortress' cities, Kovel. Even before the beginning of the latest Soviet offensive, the city had been the scene of fighting as local partisans increased their activity in late February. Few regular German forces were operating in the area, the most numerous being 17th SS Cavalry Regiment, part of 8th SS Cavalry Division (*SS-Florian Geyer*). After suffering heavy losses in the fighting at the Dnepr in the autumn of 1943, the division had been withdrawn and sent to Croatia to be re-formed, but one of its regiments remained on the Eastern Front, engaged in anti-partisan warfare. Together with a few other units – ad hoc battalions improvised from rear area troops, security personnel, a few combat engineers, and modest artillery resources – the SS cavalry found itself pressed back towards Kovel by the Soviet advance. The total strength of this 'fortress' amounted to fewer than 4,000 men, many of whom were not fit for front-line service or had little combat experience or training. After its escape from the Korsun encirclement, *SS-Wiking* had been sent to an area a little to the west to be re-formed and its troops were now ordered to join the garrison, despite having few heavy weapons. Even as Gille's division began to move towards the city on 16 March, it became clear that Kovel had been surrounded. The leading elements of *SS-Wiking*, a battalion from the regiment *SS-Germania* that had received new half-tracks, was forced to detrain near Lyuboml 28 miles (45km) west of Kovel. As further reinforcements arrived, including parts of 131st Infantry Division, Standartenführer Joachim Richter – commander of the detachment – was able to advance perhaps half the remaining distance towards Kovel. But without tanks, Richter doubted that he would be able to reach the city and requested further reinforcements.

Only a single company of the SS division's panzer regiment had been re-equipped with tanks, and there was a brief delay while Gille contacted Raus' headquarters for permission to use this tiny group; such was the paralysis that Hitler had imposed upon the chain of command that Fourth Panzer Army then had to seek approval from *OKH*. Finally, early on 27 March, the first train carrying the tanks set off east from the city of Chelm; the attack towards Kovel began the following day, pressing forward to Czercasy, just a few kilometres from the fortress perimeter. The advance cost *SS-Wiking* half of its 16 tanks damaged or disabled.

Around the Kovel perimeter, the fighting had continued for nearly two weeks, reducing the garrison's strength by perhaps a third. Gille had flown into the city just as the Soviet ring was forming and was now the designated fortress commander, and he sent urgent requests for artillery ammunition to be


Kovel, March–April 1944
N
0
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Kovel
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SS-W

delivered to his garrison by air. He sent a further signal before dawn on 30 March:

> *Kampfgruppe Gille* must insist on a breakout on 30 March, since the enemy is at the railway facilities and, as a result, dominates the aerial resupply with direct fire and there are no more forces available for an immediate counterattack.[34]

The battlegroup that had reached Czercasy had been ordered to send its tanks to the rear until more vehicles could be restored to service, but the local commander, Obersturmführer Karl Nicolussi-Leck, had other ideas and decided to press on towards Kovel, showing a level of disregard for orders that was in some respects the cornerstone of the German tradition of command being delegated to the officer closest to the action:

> At 0300 [on 30 March] I had nine operational tanks available. I moved out at 0400 in column along the railway embankment …
>
> We received fire from enemy tanks in the woods to the right of the railway embankment 2km east of Czercasy. After eliminating them, two tanks were lost to mines …
>
> At 0600, the mine obstacles had been cleared by assault engineers. Hauptmann Bolm [from 131st Infantry Division] told me that he had received orders not to advance any further. I told him I could no longer stop and moved out right away with the accompanying assault troops. I ordered the two immobilised tanks … to prepare for maintenance teams and to defend the strongpoint of Czercasy … thus keeping open the rail line for the tanks to follow. To that end, Hauptmann Bolm provided a squad of infantry to provide close-in security for the tanks.
>
> When my lead tanks were 2km west of Kovel, I received the following radio message: 'Order from the battalion commander. The tanks are to stop.' The report was called out by a messenger from Hauptmann Bolm to the trail tank and then forwarded to me by radio. Since my lead tanks were already engaged in combat with enemy infantry and tank hunter-killer teams, which were blocking the northwest exits of the city, and, a short while later, an intense firefight developed with 12 anti-tank guns and artillery pieces … it was not possible for me to halt and I therefore left Hauptmann Bolm's message unanswered … A heavy snowfall temporarily eliminated the threat from the left flank and at the same time all of the blocking positions that were in front of Stecker's strongpoint [i.e. the nearest position of the Kovel garrison] were rolled up … Around 0730, we reached the curve in the rail line and established contact with Hauptmann Stecker.[35]

The seven Panther tanks commanded by Nicolussi-Leck were an invaluable addition to the strength of Gille's garrison and managed to help eliminate several penetrations in the defensive ring. The two disabled tanks in Czercasy fought off several Soviet attacks and by the end of the day had been reinforced by parts of *SS-Germania*, but were running low on ammunition. To make matters worse, Soviet forces attacked and cut the tenuous link between the group in Czercasy and German forces further west. One of the disabled tanks was set ablaze on 1 April and the other had to be abandoned as ammunition was exhausted; some of the German troops in Czercasy fought their way out to the west while others tried to follow Nicolussi-Leck's path into Kovel. A mixture of new and repaired tanks had meanwhile arrived at Lyuboml and fresh attempts were made to attack along the railway line, with the support of Stuka attacks. Most of these tanks were lost during the day, either damaged by enemy action or bogged down in mud, but Czercasy was back in German hands.

The balance of strength swung decisively in favour of the Germans on 2 April when a further 28 Panther tanks arrived by train. By now, Kovel – formerly the northern flank of Fourth Panzer Army and therefore Army Group South – had been assigned to Army Group Centre, and 4th and 5th Panzer Divisions, which formed part of LVI Panzer Corps in the German Second Army, were ordered to join the relief effort. Although 4th Panzer Division experienced delays in its preparation, 5th Panzer Division moved to attack the village of Kruhel, to the northwest of Czercasy, on 3 April, supported by the newly arrived Panthers of *SS-Wiking*. The weather had turned cold again, causing considerable difficulties, as Major Wilhelm Drewes from 5th Panzer Division later recalled:

> After I had assembled my battalion in Rokitnitsa [in the division's original area of deployment, to the east of Brest-Litovsk] and wanted to set off as per my orders, I was faced by an almost insoluble task. The snowfall of the past days was so heavy that the snow lay more than 70cm deep. My trucks couldn't get through. I couldn't possibly carry out a 20km march on foot. I therefore gave instructions for horse-drawn sledges to be gathered in the village, so that at least our equipment and ammunition could be transported. By 1400 the convoy had assembled under the oldest wagon chief. By evening we had travelled halfway along the road … The following morning at dawn the exhausting march resumed.[36]

Eventually, Drewes' panzergrenadiers reached the forces preparing to attack Kruhel, by which time the weather had turned warmer again, bringing an unwelcome return of deep mud. The assault towards Kruhel made little progress after coming under strong flanking fire, but backed by the Panthers of *SS-Wiking*, 4th and 5th Panzer Divisions fought their way steadily forwards and reached the northwest perimeter of Kovel early on 5 April. The city and its garrison had suffered heavily in the fighting, as an officer of *SS-Wiking* described:

> Our command post was so close to the forward lines that it could be reached by rifle fire. The number of wounded was large and their quartering brought with it special difficulties, since hardly any of the houses had basements. Medical attention was also difficult as there were not enough doctors, medical supplies and medicines on hand. One doctor had even been flown in aboard a glider. The garrison was barely sufficient to man the defensive ring. The companies consisted of only a handful of soldiers. Enemy tanks succeeded again and again in penetrating into the city …
>
> There were tanks in front of the command post an hour ago until one of them was knocked out with a *Panzerfaust* and the other pulled back.[37]

Fighting continued for several days as the Germans struggled to enlarge the corridor that they had established to Kovel. Eventually, fighting died down as it did elsewhere; Kovel remained in German hands until the summer.

Hitler argued that the declaration of Tarnopol as a 'fortress' was a success, and that it provided a 'breakwater' that helped stop the Soviet advance towards Lviv. This is at least a defensible point of view, as the persistence of the Tarnopol pocket delayed the movement of Soviet infantry towards the south, where they might have been able to hinder the escape of First Panzer Army. But this success came at a heavy price. As had been the case in the First World War at Przemyśl, the existence of a beleaguered garrison a short distance behind enemy lines resulted in costly attempts to raise the siege, which would have been unnecessary had Tarnopol been abandoned in mid-March. Although Kovel was successfully held and ultimately relieved, it is again questionable whether the expenditure of effort involved was justified – the forces of *SS-Wiking* and 4th and 5th Panzer Divisions would surely have been able to blunt any Soviet attacks towards the west from the region.

Slowly, fighting died down as the spring thaw began in earnest and movement became almost impossible. Both sides had a chance to catch their breath, bring up reinforcements, and consider their options. Model was credited by Hitler with bringing the constant retreats of Army Group South to a halt, but the reality was that by the time Model arrived, the length of the Red Army's supply lines made further advances impossible. Its operations during the winter had taken the war to the western borders of the Soviet Union, and it now took the opportunity to gather its strength once more.

CHAPTER 9

THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA

Crimea has always had a special place in Russian (and therefore Soviet) thinking. Control of the peninsula was regarded as essential for dominating the Black Sea and the region first came under Russian control during the reign of Tsarina Catherine the Great. The area was next contested in the Russian Civil War and the Bolsheviks took control of Crimea in late 1920, after a brief battle with White Russian forces in the isthmus that connects the peninsula to the Ukrainian mainland. As they withdrew to Sevastopol from where they were evacuated with little interference from Bolshevik troops, the White Russian forces were forbidden from carrying out any destruction – Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel, commander of the White forces, told his men that the port facilities and other installations were the property of the Russian people and were to be left intact. Unlike other commanders in the Russian Civil War, Wrangel tried consistently – with varying degrees of success – to prevent looting, killing and destruction.

The Bolshevik forces that now occupied Crimea showed little such restraint. Wrangel had given his soldiers the freedom to remain in Russia instead of joining him in exile, and about 3,000 decided to take advantage of a Bolshevik offer of amnesty. When they arrived, the Bolsheviks summarily killed about 400 wounded men and herded the rest off to prison camps. A 'Red Terror' rapidly spread across the peninsula: about 1,000 out of 1,100 who were arrested in Feodosia were shot; 12,000 were killed in Sevastopol; and 20,000 were executed in Simferopol. Estimates of the total number killed range from 52,000 to 75,000, and about 50,000 Crimean Tatars were deported.[1] Several of the leading figures amongst the Bolsheviks were Jews, a feature that the Germans were keen to highlight when they in turn occupied the region.

A second wave of repression came in 1929 when Stalin moved against those identified as Tatar nationalists; between 3,000 and 4,000 were killed and ten times as many sent to Siberia. The region was badly affected by the famine created by Soviet collectivisation and the compulsory seizure of grain to feed the big cities in 1931–1933, resulting in widespread unrest; once more, the authorities clamped down brutally. It is estimated that between the end of the Russian Civil War and the German invasion of the Soviet Union, about 165,000 Crimean Tatars – roughly half of the Tatar population – were killed or forcibly deported.

The German plans for *Barbarossa* – the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 – barely mentioned Crimea. The main task of Army Group South was the destruction of as much of the Red Army as possible west of the Dnepr. Nevertheless, Crimea featured in Nazi thinking about the future. In some circles, the region was regarded as the ancestral home of the Goths, and many (with limited validity) viewed the Goths as the forefathers of the German people. As has already been mentioned, plans were drawn up at an early stage for the construction of a highway from Germany to Crimea, which would become the 'German Riviera', as well as a source of cotton, fruit and other products of its relatively benign climate. Naturally, Germanisation of the peninsula would require the elimination of much of the existing population and Reinhard Heydrich, head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptampt* ('Reich Main Security Office' or *RSHA*) anticipated that over half of the population of Crimea would be made up of ethnic Germans by the 1960s. Jews and communists would be the first to be 'liquidated', but ethnic Russians and Ukrainians would not be far behind. Only a limited number would be left, to serve their German masters.

Military attention was drawn to Crimea early in *Barbarossa* when the Germans realised that Soviet bombers were using the peninsula as a base for air raids against Romanian oil facilities. By the end of July 1941, occupation of Crimea became one of many priorities assigned to Army Group South by Hitler. In September, Manstein was assigned to take command of the German Eleventh Army following the death of the previous commander in an air crash; delays brought about by the destruction of bridges across the Dnepr as the Red Army retreated hindered the German build-up, and Soviet forces had ample time to reinforce their positions around the town of Perekop, which commanded the narrow isthmus connecting the Crimean peninsula to mainland Ukraine. In 1920, the Red Army had managed to outflank White Russian defences in this region by advancing close to the coast, but the Germans were unable to identify any such route, particularly for their vehicles, and Manstein had no option but to prepare for a frontal assault. It proved to be a costly exercise, but the Wehrmacht ground its way forward, breaking into Crimea itself in the last week of October. By mid-November, almost all of the peninsula was in German hands, with several Red Army divisions besieged in Sevastopol, but in the last days of 1941, the Red Army struck back, mounting an amphibious assault with landings near Feodosia and Kerch in the eastern part of Crimea. Manstein was forced to abandon the Kerch peninsula, and mounted a fresh offensive in May 1942 to recover the area. He was then able to turn his attention to Sevastopol, and launched a series of assaults that drove the garrison back to the city itself. On 3 July, the fortress was overrun. It had been a costly assault for the Germans, but one of the most renowned fortresses in the world was in their hands.

Manstein's Eleventh Army was not the only German unit in Crimea. All of the Wehrmacht forces in *Barbarossa* were followed closely by *Einsatzgruppen* ('task groups') of SS personnel, with orders to begin the implementation of occupation policies. Gruppenführer Otto Ohlendorf was a lawyer who joined the Nazi Party and the SS in the mid-1920s and rose rapidly, helping shape German economic policy. His views on this were strongly coloured by his deeply rooted belief in the superiority of the German people, which he regarded as ample justification for the exploitation of all other nationalities. Heydrich appointed him to command of *Einsatzgruppe D*, a post that he was at first reluctant to accept. Nevertheless, his group rapidly got to work behind the advancing front of Army Group South. In the first four months of the war with the Soviet Union, Ohlendorf and his subordinates killed about 40,000 people in Ukraine.[2] In an attempt to avoid individuals from being held responsible for any particular killing, Ohlendorf preferred prisoners to be shot at a distance en masse rather than individually with a single bullet to the back of the head. Ohlendorf personally attended many of the mass executions, stating that he wished to ensure that the procedure was as military and 'humane' as possible.[3] In September 1941, he wrote:

> From now on the Jewish question is going to be solved, and that means liquidation.[4]

Nevertheless, just one month later, he attracted the anger of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, when he ordered that the execution of Jewish farmers was to stop out of concerns that Ukrainian agricultural production would suffer.[5]

It should be noted that the personnel of *Einsatzgruppe D* numbered about 600. It was impossible for such a small unit to kill so many people unaided; assistance came from Romanian troops and Ukrainian paramilitaries and – crucially – Wehrmacht personnel. Attempts to portray the Wehrmacht as relatively blameless for SS atrocities in Ukraine are undermined by considerable evidence that groups of German soldiers were regularly ordered to assist *Einsatzgruppe D*. In November 1941, Manstein issued an order to Eleventh Army in which the importance of harsh measures against Jews and Bolsheviks was highlighted, something that he denied in his memoirs. Ohlendorf and Manstein met regularly to discuss matters, and the two men came to an arrangement by which Manstein assigned trucks and ammunition to Ohlendorf in return for winter clothing and other items taken from victims of the *Einsatzgruppe*. It is inconceivable that Manstein was unaware of why Ohlendorf required so much ammunition, or that he had no idea of how Ohlendorf acquired so much winter clothing.

After the German military conquest of Crimea was complete, Ohlendorf sent two *Sonderkommandos* ('Special Companies') to the peninsula. The first operation against Jews and communists was in Feodosia, where about 1,000 individuals were killed in November 1941. Later the same month, 7,000 Jews were arrested in Kerch. Some of the women were separated and systematically raped before being shot; the rest were transported in trucks to a nearby killing area. The evidence of their slaughter was clearly visible when the Red Army briefly liberated the area in 1942. Executions followed elsewhere in Crimea – about 13,000 were killed in Simferopol, a massacre that was deemed as essential by military commanders as a means of avoiding famine.[6] Similarly, Manstein's headquarters noted with approval the execution of 455 Jews in the liquidation of a small camp in Dzhankoi in northern Crimea, as this eliminated the need for rations to be sent to the camp.[7]

The policies of the Soviet authorities before the arrival of the Germans now bore a bitter fruit. Many Crimeans remembered the role played by prominent Jews during the Bolshevik 'Terror' and denounced Jews to the Germans without compunction. In April 1942, the Crimean peninsula was declared to be *Judenfrei* ('free of Jews'), though killings continued in Kerch for several weeks after. *Einsatzgruppe D* moved out of Crimea in the summer of 1942, but the occupation authorities, functioning as a district of *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* ('Reich Commissariat Ukraine'), continued to eliminate 'enemies' in addition to conscripting people as forced labourers. Over 60,000 such labourers were dispatched to Germany and elsewhere; few returned to their homes after the war.

Many Crimeans joined the German cause willingly. Large numbers of Crimean Tatars volunteered for service, perhaps as a consequence for how the Bolsheviks had treated them before the war. One declared:

> For 20 years we were prisoners of the godless Soviets and we have hungered and worked day and night. Now we wish to help the German Army with all our strength and with our hearts.[8]

A Crimean Tatar SS brigade was formed, ultimately growing into a mountain regiment, but it was plagued by desertions and never saw combat. Nevertheless, the Tatars were to pay a huge price for their collaboration with the Germans.

In September 1943, the German Seventeenth Army, commanded by General Erwin Jaenecke, began a withdrawal from the Taman peninsula to the east of Crimea. Many of its divisions were swiftly sent north as reinforcements for Army Group South, and by the time that the evacuation was complete Jaenecke retained control of three German and seven Romanian infantry divisions. None of the German divisions were remotely close to full strength, and the total combat strength available for the defence of Crimea was perhaps as little as 40,000 men. It seems that Jaenecke had little intention of trying to mount a prolonged defence of Crimea and from an early stage discussed possible evacuation options with his staff. To complicate matters further, at least part of Crimea was still designated as a rear area and was under separate command, and if Soviet forces were to threaten to advance across southern Ukraine and thus threaten the Perekop isthmus, there was considerable potential for an uncoordinated response.

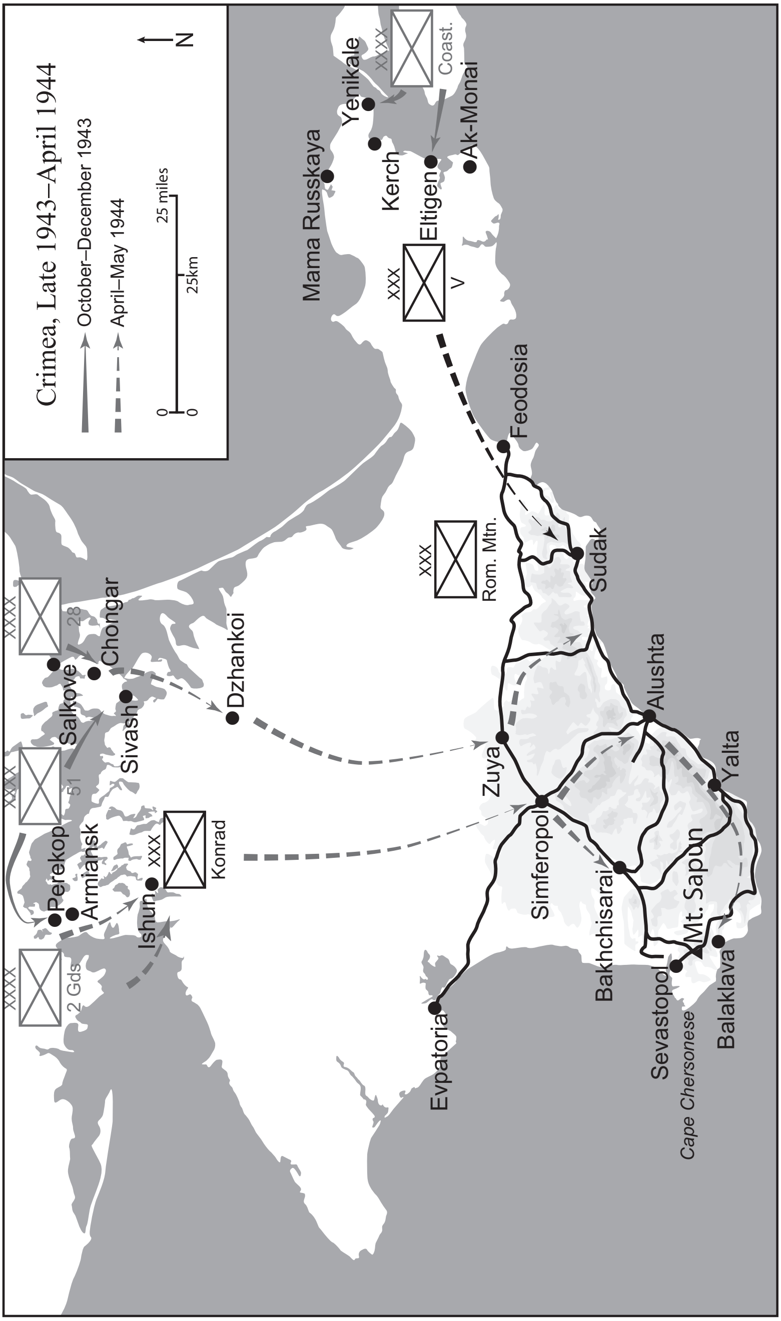
Soviet planners had begun to consider how best to recapture the Crimean peninsula in the early autumn of 1943. Just as Hitler stressed the importance of holding the peninsula in view of its use as a potential Soviet bombing base against Romanian oilfields and because of the possible political impact of its loss on his Balkan allies, *Stavka* saw benefits in its capture for precisely the same reasons. However, opinion was divided, as Shtemenko later described:

> Some thought that Crimea need not be taken yet, but could be simply blockaded instead, thus sealing off considerable enemy forces and freeing a large number of our own troops for action elsewhere. The advocates of this view were jokingly dubbed 'isolationists'.
>
> If this line of action were taken, the enemy would be able to threaten from Crimea the rear of our forces attacking across the Dnepr. He would retain a base for harassing communications in Northern Tavria [the region between Crimea

> and the estuary of the Dnepr], the coasts of the Black and Azov Seas, and the oilfields of the northern Caucasus. There were other weak spots in the isolationists' position. Eventually, their view was discarded and preference given to capturing Crimea and wiping out the enemy forces there.
>
> The question now was how to go about it. At first there was no unanimity on this point either.[9]

In a meeting on 22 September, Vasilevsky proposed a plan for a rapid advance past Melitopol to the Perekop and Chongar isthmuses, on the heels of the retreating Germans. In order to be able to mount this operation, Southern Front – shortly to be renamed 4th Ukrainian Front – would be reinforced by troops from North Caucasus Front, currently facing Crimea across the Kerch strait. In order to aid the troops trying to penetrate into Crimea, airborne forces would be dropped at Dzhankoi, where they would link up with troops landed on the nearby northeast coast of Crimea – this would effectively outflank the German defences across the isthmuses to the north. After some discussion, this proposal was rejected. It would take too long to transfer troops from North Caucasus Front to Tolbukhin's Southern Front, and this move was certain to be detected by the Germans. It was decided that it would be better for North Caucasus Front to make an amphibious attack against the Kerch peninsula, though it was accepted that this would probably have to be done in two stages. The first would be to secure a bridgehead; the second, in coordination with an attempt to break into the peninsula from the north, would see North Caucasus Front's troops advancing into the Crimean interior from this bridgehead.

On 28 October, Hitler issued definitive orders that ended any speculation by Jaenecke and his staff about a possible evacuation: Jaenecke's Seventeenth Army was to remain in Crimea. Tolbukhin's armies broke through the lines of the German Sixth Army around Melitopol and rushed towards the roads leading to Crimea, and Jaenecke deployed some weak battlegroups along the line of the Tatar Wall, an ancient fortification across the Perekop isthmus; the battle that followed would largely be decided by who could reinforce their troops faster. The Soviet thrust was led by the Soviet XIX Tank Corps and IV Guards Cavalry Corps, backed by Lieutenant General Iakov Grigorevich Kreizer's Fifty-First Army. In addition, Twenty-Eighth Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Aleksei Aleksandrovich Grechkin, was ordered to attempt to break into Crimea via the Chongar isthmus to the east of the Perekop isthmus, and at the same time General Ivan Efimovich Petrov would lead North Caucasus Front in an amphibious landing at Kerch. Despite all of these Soviet formations being far


Crimea, Late 1943–April 1944
October–December 1943
April–May 1944
0
25 miles
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25km
N
XXXX
Coast.
Yenikale
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Sudak
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Chongar
Salkove
Sivash
Dzhankoi
XXXX
51
Perekop
Armiansk
XXX
Konrad
Ishun
XXXX
2 Gds
Zuya
Alushta
Yalta
Simferopol
Bakhchisarai
Mt. Sapun
Sevastopol
Balaklava
Cape Chersonese
Evpatoria

from full strength, they were significantly superior in numbers to the German and Romanian forces in their path, and most important of all they had reasonable armoured assets; by contrast, Jaenecke's armour consisted entirely of some weak assault gun battalions.

The first attempt by the Red Army to penetrate into the peninsula came via the Chongar isthmus on the last day of October 1943. Apparently unaware that the Germans had deployed a small blocking force, Grechkin sent forces down the road through the peninsula with little or no reconnaissance. A column of Soviet trucks motored into the gunsights of a German position at Salkove and was swiftly destroyed, and sporadic fighting continued through the day. Finally resigned to defending the Crimean peninsula, Jaenecke ordered 50th Infantry Division to send a battlegroup to reinforce the defences at Perekop, but before it could arrive, XIX Tank Corps attacked on 1 November. With no preparatory bombardment, the leading Soviet tank brigade launched an attack at first light and drove off a Slovakian brigade. Rapidly, the Soviet thrust advanced to Armiansk, and at the same time Soviet troops began to wade across the shallow Sivash lagoon that lies between the Perekop and Chongar isthmuses. Although these troops were able to establish a bridgehead, it took several weeks for a bridge to be constructed across the muddy lagoon, and fighting continued to be concentrated around Perekop. The Red Army established a salient projecting into the German positions and then defended against determined counterattacks; eventually, exhaustion and casualties brought the fighting to a halt. For the moment, Tolbukhin was ordered to adopt the previously rejected policy of the 'isolationists' – instead, he was to concentrate his efforts on destroying the Nikopol bridgehead.

The Red Army had already attacked Crimea in 1942 by mounting an amphibious attack on the Kerch peninsula, and in anticipation of a further effort, Jaenecke assigned V Corps, commanded by General Karl Allmendinger, the task of defending the area. V Corps was largely built around 98th Infantry Division, which – like all German infantry divisions at this stage of the war – was far below its establishment strength. In addition, Allmendinger had control of a Romanian cavalry corps, consisting of 6th Cavalry Division and 3rd Mountain Division, and an assault gun battalion. Weakened by the losses it had suffered – partly in the amphibious operation of 1942, and partly from the attentions of the Luftwaffe – the capability of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet to ferry troops to Kerch was limited, but *Stavka* ordered Petrov to make an attempt to cross the Kerch strait at the same time that pressure was applied to the German defences on the land routes into Crimea – at the very least, such an operation would require the

Germans to divert troops to the eastern part of the region. A rag-tag flotilla of fishing vessels, tugs and barges was assembled with the intention of transporting Eighteenth and Fifty-Sixth Armies across the strait. All of the artillery of Fifty-Sixth Army was deployed on the narrow Chushka peninsula, which projects towards the Kerch peninsula from the northeast, in order to assist the main landings northeast of Kerch at Yenikale. At the same time, Eighteenth Army – supported by rather more modest artillery resources – would carry out its landings at Eltigen, further south.

Petrov planned to make his attack on 31 October, but last-minute confusion over the movement of shipping led to this being postponed. The following morning, one of the vessels tasked with ferrying troops from Fifty-Sixth Army struck a German mine and was sunk, and there was a further delay while the waters were checked for other mines, but in the meantime the boats carrying the first regiment from Eighteenth Army sailed through the Kerch strait and began to approach Crimea. These vessels also ran into mines and two were rapidly lost, together with about 200 men – crucially, including the commander of the regiment and most of his senior officers. Disorder began to spread through the small fleet with different boats travelling at different speeds. Before dawn on 1 November, the leading boats ran into a mined barrier that the Germans had constructed off the Crimean coast and several more were sunk; despite these explosions, it seems that the Germans remained oblivious of the attempt to cross the strait, and their shore guns remained silent.

As the boats approached the landing beach, Soviet aircraft dropped bombs and machine-gunned the dark shoreline, and a 35-minute artillery bombardment followed from the other side of the strait. Although the beach selected for the landing was close to the area where Soviet troops had waded ashore in late 1941, Petrov's troops appear to have been unaware of the presence of a sand bar about 50m from the coast. Many boats unloaded their troops onto the sand bar, and – believing they had reached the Crimean shore – these men ran forward into the darkness. Heavily laden with weapons and equipment, many sank into the deep water between the sand bar and the true shore. Finally, small groups of Soviet troops staggered up the beach to find that it was strewn with German barbed wire entanglements, barely disturbed by the air and artillery bombardment.

This strip of coastline was covered by a single company of German soldiers, and despite all of the noise – the air and artillery attacks, and the explosions when Soviet boats encountered the offshore obstacle – it took an astonishing 15 minutes before the Germans realised that a landing was under way. It was still not light, and after flares lit up the approaching Soviet fleet, German artillery finally opened fire. More boats were lost, including the barges carrying the expeditionary force's 76mm field guns. Out of 5,700 men who had set off from the far shore, fewer than 3,000 managed to reach the beach at Eltigen.[10]

The senior officer in the Soviet bridgehead was Major Dmitri Stepanovich Koveshnikov, and he struggled to bring order to the soldiers of several battalions who now found themselves on the Crimean shore. The Germans assembled a battalion-sized group to destroy the bridgehead, but in the meantime, Koveshnikov managed to establish radio contact with the far shore and called in artillery fire on the German positions, successfully beating off the German attack, which was backed by a small group of assault guns. Soviet reinforcements landed during the night, more than doubling the strength of the troops. Koveshnikov was doubtless relieved to hand over command to a more senior officer; he was later awarded Hero of the Soviet Union for the part that he had played. On 2 November, the German 98th Infantry Division tried once more to destroy the bridgehead. Although the attacks made some progress and managed to reduce the size of the bridgehead to perhaps half what it had been, this was at the price of considerable casualties, particularly from the Soviet artillery firing across the Kerch strait. Numerically, the balance had shifted in favour of the Red Army, but without heavy weapons and particularly tanks, it was almost impossible for the soldiers on the beach to break out of their bridgehead.

The Eltigen landing had been intended as a diversionary attack, and the main landing was now finally ready to proceed. Late on 3 November, the soldiers began to board the flotilla of fishing boats, barges and other small vessels, and before dawn the following day the massed artillery on the Chushka spit put down a heavy bombardment. Perhaps alerted by the events at Eltigen, the Germans reacted far faster than they had a few days before and opened fire on the boats as they approached, sinking many, but despite the defensive fire most of the Soviet troops – from 2nd Guards and 55th Guards Rifle Divisions, supported by a naval infantry battalion – managed to reach the Crimean shore. By the end of 4 November, about 4,000 Soviet troops from Fifty-Sixth Army were ashore, and the German defences – less than a battalion in strength at first, slowly increasing to four battalions as the day progressed – were driven off. Petrov's forces had secured a beachhead about eight miles (13km) wide and five miles (8km) deep.

As with many operations involving water crossings, the battle became a race to see which side could reinforce its units faster. The Germans needed to destroy the Eltigen beachhead rapidly in order to transfer forces to face the new, larger Soviet landing, and the Red Army was anxious to strengthen their units in Crimea. Somehow, the paper-thin German screen around the beachhead managed to prevent a Soviet breakout over the next two days; running low on ammunition, the Soviet troops had to pause while further supplies and men were brought across. However, the attempt to eliminate the Eltigen beachhead, on 7 November, made almost no progress. Although German patrol boats intercepted many of the supply vessels trying to reach the beachhead, it remained intact and the Germans abandoned their attempts to crush it. Instead, Romanian troops replaced the German units and, with German patrol boats now mounting an increasingly successful blockade, the Eltigen landing was effectively neutralised.

The Soviet Fifty-Sixth Army was now renamed the Coastal Army, and Petrov was appointed as its commander. Starting on 10 November, the Soviet troops renewed their attempts to break out of the main beachhead. Over two days, they advanced to the outskirts of Kerch, but once again the German defences proved just strong enough to bring them to a halt while further reinforcements were brought forward by both sides. However, events now moved in favour of the Germans. A combination of deteriorating weather and increased activity by the German patrol boats began to have an effect, delaying any resumption of Soviet attempts to break through to Kerch. The Romanians began to exert pressure on the Eltigen beachhead at the beginning of December, and the situation for the Soviet troops rapidly became desperate as their ammunition and food stocks ran low. Late on 6 December, the remaining Soviet troops attempted to break out of the doomed beachhead and march through German and Romanian lines to link up with the main beachhead to the east of Kerch. At first, the attempt went well, but when they encountered German troops near Kerch itself, they were forced to take up a defensive position on the coast. Soviet boats managed to reach them and took several of them to safety, but on 11 December the small enclave was overrun and destroyed.

This effectively brought the fighting in Crimea to an end in 1943. At the headquarters of Seventeenth Army, Jaenecke had little illusion about the abilities of his troops to hold out in the spring when the Red Army renewed its attacks, particularly as he was entirely dependent upon seaborne supplies, but Hitler remained determined to cling to the peninsula. Hitler refused to accept any comparison with Stalingrad, where Sixth Army had been repeatedly assured that it could be supplied adequately by air, and just as Göring had promised the Führer that his aircraft would keep Sixth Army alive, Vizeadmiral Helmuth Brinkmann, commander of the *Kriegsmarine* forces in the Black Sea, gave repeated assurances that he would be able to supply Seventeenth Army indefinitely, and evacuate it should the need arise. Such assurances were of course dependent upon Germany continuing to retain control of ports like

Odessa and Nikolayev, but Hitler heard only what he wanted to hear: there was no need for an immediate evacuation. At the end of November 1943, he contacted Ion Antonescu, the ruler of Romania, stressing his determination to hold the Crimean peninsula. Reinforcements would be sent immediately, and land contact would be restored in the coming months. There was no hint about how this was to be achieved.

To a degree, Hitler's decision to hold Crimea at all costs was a logical one. A large proportion of the troops involved were Romanian, and the performance of Romanian soldiers around Stalingrad had left the Germans with no faith whatever in their ability to stand firm. As has already been described, the resilience of German infantry was little better, but the German perception of their ally's fragility was widespread at the time. By relying on Romanian troops to defend Crimea, the Germans felt that they were neutralising substantial enemy forces with only a minimal commitment of their own resources. The German elements of Seventeenth Army were relatively modest compared to the Soviet forces that were currently tied down, and of course there remained the argument that Soviet reoccupation of the peninsula would lead to air attacks against the Romanian oilfields. There was also the risk that, using Crimea as a base, the Red Army could mount amphibious operations along the Black Sea coast of the western parts of Ukraine.

Reinforcements were dispatched to Seventeenth Army, but they amounted to very little – a handful of battalions of mainly 'fortress' troops, soldiers who were regarded as too elderly or infirm for full front-line service. On 10 January, under constant pressure from *Stavka* to deliver results, Petrov tried to outflank the German defences at Kerch with a further amphibious landing, which failed with heavy losses. Ten days later, both sides suffered heavy casualties as the Soviet Coastal Army tried to break out of its positions near Kerch, and two days later two battalions of Soviet troops were landed in Kerch harbour. They managed to get ashore, but they were unable to support each other effectively and were crushed in detail.

Stalin now lost patience with his subordinates. Following the failure of this latest attack, *Stavka* sent a pointed signal to Petrov on 27 January:

> From the Coastal Army's actions it is evident that the army's main efforts are now aimed at taking the town of Kerch by heavy street fighting. Battles inside the town are leading to major losses of manpower making it difficult to use the support weapons that we have in the army – artillery, rocket launchers, tanks and aircraft. *Stavka* would point out the difference between the Coastal Army and

> the enemy in that the former has considerable superiority over the latter in numbers of troops, artillery, tanks and aircraft. These advantages are being lost when the army engages in street fighting within the town where the enemy has dug in, where we have to engage in long drawn-out assaults for every street and every house and where there are no conditions for effective employment of all the weapons at our disposal for neutralising the enemy. *Stavka* considers these tactics by the army command as absolutely incorrect, as of benefit to the enemy and entirely unhelpful to us.
>
> *Stavka* believes that the army's major efforts should be directed at actions against the enemy on the open plain where there is every opportunity effectively to employ all of our support forces. All talk of it being impossible to break down the strong enemy defence on the open ground is absolutely groundless, insofar as even the defence that the Germans had at Leningrad was three times more powerful than what they have at Kerch and it was overcome thanks to able leadership.[11]

Petrov had previously advised *Stavka* that there was actually very little by way of 'open ground', as the landscape outside Kerch was dominated by a series of ridges that were just as costly to storm as the buildings around the outskirts of Kerch, but nevertheless, he promised to try again. When the next attack, ten days later, also failed, he was removed from his post and demoted to colonel-general, and Vice-Admiral Lev Anatolevich Vladimirsky, commander of the Black Sea Fleet, was transferred to the Baltic. In their place, Stalin turned to General Andrei Ivanovich Eremenko, who had commanded Stalingrad Front during the critical days of 1942 and 1943. More recently, he had been commander of Kalinin Front in the north, but he now returned to the southern sector to replace Petrov. Vladimirsky was replaced by Vice-Admiral Filipp Sergeyevich Oktyabrsky, who had previously commanded the Black Sea Fleet but had been replaced by Vladimirsky after a failed amphibious attack on the southern side of the Taman peninsula in July 1943.

For Eremenko, whose previous appointments had been in command of Fronts, this new assignment as commander of the Coastal Army was effectively a demotion, but Stalin showed considerable tact when he met Eremenko on 3 February, as the latter described:

> 'It has been suggested,' said Stalin, 'to send you to command the Coastal Army, effectively as a Front, operating in Crimea and its approaches. This command will include the air army, combined arms units, the Black Sea Fleet, and the Azov

> Military Flotilla and the Black Sea Fleet Air Force.' I understood that, speaking in detail about the composition of the command, the supreme commander took care not to damage my self-esteem, as I had been appointed to command an army after commanding Fronts. 'The army has attacked, but things are not going well there at the moment. Two offensive operations were planned in that sector, but they were not carried out successfully.' As usual, Stalin asked about my agreement with the appointment. I answered in the affirmative.[12]

In March 1944, the German Seventeenth Army received some much-needed reinforcements. The weakened 73rd and 111th Infantry Divisions arrived by sea; both had been involved in Sixth Army's defensive fighting immediately north of Crimea during the previous year and were far from full strength, but were nonetheless a welcome, if modest, boost. In addition, another battalion of assault guns arrived, and together with the provision of the new infantry anti-tank weapons like the *Panzerfaust* and *Panzerschreck*, the ability of the German troops to defeat Soviet armour improved considerably. However, their Romanian allies received almost no reinforcements; Germany's ally was showing increasing signs of regretting its involvement in the war.

Romania emerged from the First World War with its territories considerably enhanced. These gains – largely in the east from the Russian Empire, the west from Bulgaria, and the north from Hungary – came with difficulties due to large non-Romanian populations, and in 1940 territorial adjustments were enforced on Romania by her powerful neighbours. The Soviet Union regained much of the land that had been annexed by the Romanians to the east, and the Germans and Italians oversaw the return of territory to Bulgaria in the west and much of Transylvania to Hungary. Immediately after this latter adjustment, King Carol II of Romania was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Michael, and a new government was formed through an alliance of the military, under General Ion Antonescu, and the Iron Guard, a Fascist political party.

This alliance didn't last long, with tension centred around the distribution of wealth seized from Jews; the Iron Guard wished to proceed rapidly against Jews and other minority populations, whereas Antonescu favoured a more gradual approach, largely due to concerns about the disruption that would be caused by the elimination of so many Jewish industrialists, financiers, and other professionals. As friction increased between the Iron Guard and Antonescu, the former became increasingly virulent in its anti-Semitism, drawing attention to the fact that Antonescu had for a while been married to a Jew. The tension between the two parties was reflected in the support they received from Germany:

the Fascist Iron Guard was in favour with Himmler, Goebbels and others, while Antonescu was supported by the Wehrmacht and the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. In mid-January 1941, Antonescu met Hitler and agreed to support Germany in a future war against the Soviet Union in exchange for a free hand to deal with the Iron Guard, and having secured this agreement he moved quickly. Several leading Iron Guard officials were arrested or dismissed from their government posts in the following days, and violence between the two sides erupted at the end of the month. On 21 January, the Iron Guard called for the people of Romania to rise up against the Jews and Freemasons who were endangering the country, and hundreds of ordinary Romanians joined the Iron Guard in attacking Jewish sections of Bucharest, resulting in the deaths – often after terrible and prolonged torture – of 125 Jews.

Antonescu spent the first days of the 'uprising' moving troops into the Bucharest area. Several Romanian soldiers fell into the hands of the Iron Guard and were killed, and on 23 January the army moved against the insurgents. Within a day, the uprising was over and the Iron Guard ceased to exist as a political power. But whilst many ordinary Romanians were appalled when details of the brief pogrom against the Jews of Bucharest emerged, worse was to follow, showing that the differences between the Iron Guard and Antonescu were more related to the practical implementation of anti-Semitic measures than anything else. In June 1941, with preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union gaining pace, Antonescu decided to take action against the Jewish population of the city of Iaşi – like the Germans, Antonescu regarded Bolshevism and the Jews as inextricably linked, and whilst he undoubtedly regarded his actions as a pragmatic move to eliminate a threat in one of the cities that would be close to the start line for the war against the Soviet Union, the language he used in an order issued in mid-June 1941 made his views abundantly clear:

> All the Judeo-Communist coffee shops in Moldavia [must] be closed down, all kikes, Communist agents and sympathisers must be identified region by region.[13]

As Romanian troops crossed the border into the Soviet Union alongside the Wehrmacht, imprisoned members of the Iron Guard were released from prison, armed, and recruited into paramilitary police battalions. Working with the assistance of German bodies, these battalions moved against the Jews of Iaşi at the end of June 1941. Over 13,000 Jews were killed or deported to a concentration camp where most of them later died. Further killings of Jews, suspected

Communists, and large parts of the Roma population followed, and Romanian personnel were heavily involved in the Holocaust in Ukraine. The soldiers of the Romanian Army contributed considerably to the fighting against the Red Army in 1941 and 1942, but performed disastrously during the Stalingrad campaign; correctly identifying that they were weak in anti-tank weaponry, the Soviet planners targeted the pincers of the Stalingrad encirclement at the Romanian Third and Fourth Armies, which – with the notable exception of a small group led by General Mihail Lascăr – were rapidly overwhelmed. Thereafter, Romanian troops played only a small role in the fighting outside Crimea until the front line reached Romanian territory.

By 1944, Antonescu could see that the war was probably lost. Romanian cities were increasingly coming under air attack and Germany failed repeatedly to pay for oil and agricultural produce that Romania was obliged to send to her ally, and the resultant shortages within Romania drove inflation to high levels. The widespread support for Germany that had existed at the beginning of the war with the Soviet Union was replaced by general hostility and mistrust. Matters weren't helped by increasing awareness that the Nazis regarded Romanians as part of the Latin population of Europe – in the Nazi racial hierarchy, this placed them below the Aryan Germans. In early 1943, Antonescu authorised Romanian officials to establish contact with the Western Allies in an attempt to secure an armistice with them, while continuing to be at war with the Soviet Union – this would, he hoped, bring to an end the British and American air raids on Romanian cities. Unsurprisingly, these approaches were rebuffed with the clear message that the Western Allies were adhering to their previous announcements and would not countenance a separate peace. Any armistice would have to include the Soviet Union. There was also growing friction between Antonescu and the young King Michael, who publicly distanced himself from Germany. Inevitably, the Germans became aware of at least some of the diplomatic contacts between the Western Allies and Romania; with his armed forces heavily dependent upon Romanian oil, Hitler placed huge importance on keeping the land war away from Romania in order to prevent Antonescu defecting.

It was in this context that the Romanians chose not to reinforce their divisions in Crimea. As a consequence, the fighting strength of the divisions in the peninsula declined drastically, with some reporting that they had fewer than 50 per cent of their establishment forces. As had been the case in the First World War, experience in the aftermath of the Stalingrad encirclement had shown that the weaker units of Germany's allies fought better when their ranks were strengthened with German units, and Jaenecke did what he could to assign

Romanian battalions to German divisions and vice versa, and ordered the Romanians to conduct anti-partisan operations in the Crimean interior. The low morale of the Romanian troops perhaps contributed to the tendency of at least some Romanians to try to warn the local population that anti-partisan operations were being planned. After the war, a member of the partisan movement recalled:

> Early in the morning on 23 December, Olga [a fellow partisan] met me. From her gloomy face, I realised that something had happened.
>
> 'Bad news,' she said. 'A large train with troops arrived at the station. While they were disembarking, a Romanian soldier told a railway worker that they were being transferred here from the front to fight the partisans. The Romanian asked him to warn the partisans.'
>
> I was doubtful. 'This is just gossip. There aren't that many troops being moved to the rear.'
>
> 'I don't know,' she replied. 'This Romanian said that he had been captured by the partisans. They gave him food and wine and released him.'
>
> … We gathered more information from underground sources. This confirmed the message of the Romanian. The Germans were really preparing for a large trawl through the forests. The most complete report was sent to me from Musya [another partisan]:
>
> 'During 23–24 December, troops marched constantly through Simferopol and its suburbs,' she wrote. 'They were made up of infantry with rifles, machine-guns, artillery, small-calibre mountain guns, and anti-aircraft guns … In five days, the soldiers will be sent into the forest. Their task is to encircle the woodland, set it ablaze if necessary, and utterly destroy the partisans. Some of the Romanians are ready to surrender and go over to the partisans. But there are quite a few bastards who will be merciless. One said: "We promised that each of us would kill at least five partisans. Anyone who kills 20 will immediately be granted leave and a cash prize."'[14]

It is questionable whether Romanian prisoners were always treated so well – the involvement of Romanian troops in atrocities was widely known at this time. Nevertheless, the partisans took what measures they could in anticipation of the attacks. When they came, these were a mixed success – perhaps half of the partisans fighting the Axis forces were eliminated, but several Romanian divisions were tied down in these anti-partisan operations at a time when every man was needed at the front line in expectation of renewed Red Army attacks.

And there was no doubt that such attacks were coming. The Soviet troops at Perekop and Sivash had been preparing for a resumption of their attempts to break into the Crimean peninsula and had received a steady stream of reinforcements; soldiers had also undergone extensive training to prepare for a new offensive, and additional combat engineer teams had been assigned to the formations that would lead the attack. One formation that had spent much of the winter in reserve, recovering its strength after the losses of the previous year, was LXIII Rifle Corps, commanded by Major General Petr Kirillovich Koshevoi. As 3rd and 4th Ukrainian Fronts resumed their attacks to eliminate the German presence in the Dnepr bend, there was widespread expectation amongst the personnel of the corps that they would soon rejoin 4th Ukrainian Front in order to sustain the drive towards the west, but instead the unit was ordered to join Fifty-First Army near Sivash. Although a bridge had been erected during the winter to reach the bridgehead established at the end of the previous year, many soldiers still had to wade through the cold water to reach their positions:

> There was light frost with occasional snow, but a gusty, piercing wind cut us to the bone despite our sheepskin coats. We were not the only unit on the Sivash coast. A group of sappers and a team of signallers from 263rd Rifle Division, which was defending the bridgehead, were preparing to wade across the ford ...
>
> Many soldiers were barefoot. They took off their shoes and trousers, bundled them together and placed them on their heads. They tucked their overcoats high over their belts.
>
> ‘There’s nowhere to dry things in the bridgehead. Therefore, many men prefer to change clothes when they arrive in dry clothing,’ the commander [of the sappers] explained. ‘When you get to the other side, give your legs a good rub. Drink some vodka. If you don’t rub your legs, they will swell and your joints will ache.’
>
> A gust of cold wind made us shudder. The commander took off his boots and trousers. His comrades helped him bundle them and place them on his head.
>
> ‘Forward march!’ he gave a quiet command and was the first into the water. The soldiers followed him. There was a crunch of frost underfoot. The crossing had begun.[15]

Eremenko was busy with his new command, and carried out a detailed investigation into the failure of the Coastal Army to break out of its beachheads:

> We interviewed staff officers and unit commanders, and visited front line formations to hear the opinions of those implementing plans – privates, NCOs, and officers – as well as analysing operational planning documents, artillery fire

> missions, and unit combat reports, and drew conclusions about the reasons for the failure of the [January] operation.
>
> It came down to this: the enemy's front line and fields of fire were not reconnoitred thoroughly. Our artillery fired mainly from its emplacements and rarely engaged in directed fire, and as a result enemy strongpoints, bunkers, and firing positions were only partially destroyed, his defensive network was not disrupted, and the Germans met our infantry attacks with heavy fire.[16]

Eremenko implemented the lessons learned without delay. Officers at every level were briefed on why things had gone wrong before, with great emphasis on detailed and effective reconnaissance. Major General Alexander Kuzmich Sokolsky, Eremenko's artillery commander, was given the task of ensuring more effective use of artillery and systematic deployment of artillery observers to modify bombardments as the battle unfolded. Other measures were taken to improve the delivery of rations, replacement clothing and equipment, and fuel and ammunition. To that end, an improvised railway bridge was constructed from the Taman peninsula to the beachhead; despite intermittent German air attacks, it remained functional until the end of the war.

The new operational plan drawn up by the Red Army was agreed by Tolbukhin, Eremenko and Stalin at the end of February. Attacks would be made both by Tolbukhin and Eremenko, though the Coastal Army's mission was largely to tie down as many German troops as possible while the main advance came from the north. Kreizer's Fifty-First Army would break out of its bridgehead near Sivash as the main thrust while Second Guards Army attacked on the Perekop isthmus; once the Germans had been driven back, XIX Tank Corps would be deployed to advance swiftly from the north to Simferopol and on to Sevastopol. Given the repeated use of amphibious landings, it was almost inevitable that another such operation would be considered. Some of Eremenko's staff suggested that, in addition to the main pinning attack by the Coastal Army, fresh landings should be carried out on the northern and southern sides of the Kerch peninsula:

> This plan was based on the fact that the enemy had firm defences at Cape Tarkhan and Kerch with his flanks on the shores of the Sea of Azov and Kerch Bay and had concentrated his main forces there. The enemy's coastal defences to the north between Cape Tarkhan and Ak-Monai consisted of four Romanian battalions in isolated positions, reinforced by artillery and mortars. The southern coast of the Kerch Peninsula from Kerch to Feodosia was defended by elements of the

Romanian 6th Cavalry Division and 2nd Mountain Division with denser defences than the northern side, but was still not a strong defensive line.

The task of the assault forces would be to secure bridgeheads and advantageous positions to cut the enemy's Kerch grouping's lines of retreat to the west and draw off their reserves, thus facilitating the breakthrough of the enemy's defences by the main forces of the Coastal Army. To accomplish this, two rifle divisions and a vanguard battalion of marines, supported by artillery, tanks, sappers and other specialists, would make up each landing force. The composition of the forces was dictated by the need to secure the beachhead and ensure further troop movements. For the troops landing near Feodosia, this required them to seize and hold the port.

A landing on the southern shore of the Kerch peninsula would have to be near Feodosia. There was no other area suitable for the purpose as landing an assault force on a bare shoreline, in addition to exposure to attack by enemy naval forces, had been shown to be fraught with great difficulties. Two locations on the north shore were identified for landings: the Mama Russkaya area; and the Ak-Monai area.

The transportation of the south coast assault force could be entrusted to the Black Sea Fleet, which could transfer the combat units of two divisions in one wave and their rear area units in a second wave. The transportation of the north coast assault force was supposed to be carried out by the Azov flotilla. It was calculated that by using large and small vessels and barges, the Azov flotilla could do this in three waves. The first would carry the main forces of one division (3,500 men, 62 guns, 160 horses, and 212 tons of supplies). The second would carry the division's rear area units (16 motor vehicles, 60 horses, four guns and about 500 personnel). The remaining second-wave craft would carry troops and equipment of the second division, the complete transportation of which would require the third wave. Both divisions could take with them only part of their motor transport, as otherwise it would require the diversion of too many vessels from their other duties. The distance from the embarkation point of Kordona to Mama Russkaya was 40km [24 miles] and to Ak-Monai about 167km [100 miles].

This tempting plan to incorporate landings in the offensive operation was rejected for the following reasons. The vessels of the Azov flotilla were predominantly designed for river use with very poor seaworthiness. It was essential to have calm weather for their use. Since the operation would last several days, it would only be possible with a favourable weather forecast of 5–10 days, which was unlikely in the Sea of Azov during the spring. The landing area was exposed to north and northeast winds, which would create large waves, almost eliminating

> the possibility of approaching the coast and landing even when the wind was relatively low. The passage of such a large number of small vessels through minefields in fog carried an unjustifiable risk of disruption. A long sea voyage during daylight would require extensive fighter air cover. A prolonged landing operation is always risky, and troops landed near Ak-Monai might not receive any reinforcements for three days and would thus be in a difficult position to fight the enemy. Finally, the vessels currently used to ferry supplies to the Kerch beachhead would be unable to carry out their work in the Kerch strait for a long period.
>
> The landing of troops near Feodosia was also associated with great risks for shipping and personnel. The enemy had superiority of forces in the Black Sea. The prolonged use of the ships of the Black Sea Fleet risked enemy submarine attack and would require powerful air cover. The deployment of ships in the landing area carried the risk of them striking mines, since the waters of the south coast of the Kerch peninsula and Crimea were heavily mined by the enemy.
>
> Analysis of the experience of landing troops in Feodosia and Kerch in 1941 and 1942 suggested that a successful operation required the presence of strong, fast naval forces, good air cover, and speed of execution. We could not guarantee any of these. Therefore, in order not to disperse our forces and to avoid unjustified losses, we abandoned the idea of amphibious assaults in the Kerch operation. We decided to concentrate all efforts on the beachhead, subordinating all aviation and the Azov flotilla to this.[17]

This painstaking assessment contrasts starkly with the hasty staffwork that preceded Petrov's earlier landing attempts, but whilst such diligence was characteristic of Eremenko, it should be remembered that Petrov was under considerable pressure from Stalin to deliver results quickly. By contrast, Eremenko had the luxury of the winter pause in fighting to take a much more detailed look at matters.

Conditions in the Sivash bridgehead were grim, as Koshevoi later recalled:

> The situation forced the creation of a 'vehicle towing service', unforeseen in any long-term plans. The task of this improvised organisation was to rescue vehicles stranded in the mud. Tractors and personnel were assigned by each corps headquarters. On particularly rainy days, the number of soldiers employed in the 'towing service' numbered several thousand. This was the only way to bring timber and other construction materials to the crossings, deliver food, fuel and ammunition to the troops, and evacuate the wounded and sick from the bridgehead. The soldiers toiled covered from head to toe with salty mud. When

they were resting, they often could neither wash themselves, nor get dry. But I don't remember any occasion when anyone complained about the hard work or conditions. The unity from shared combat experiences supported us ...

As promised, the commander [Kreizer] visited me on the southern shore of the Sivash at a typical location in the bridgehead. The view was utterly bleak. Not a tree, not a bush. It was as flat as a table, an endless steppe with a smooth white surface and shallow salt lakes. Not even weeds were visible, nor the restless balls of tumbleweed that are usual in these places in the autumn. In a few places, occasional reddish-grey wormwood could be seen. You could see all the way to the horizon. It seemed that our troops were completely exposed to the enemy's view and fire. To the south of our front line on some burial mounds – ancient Scythian mounds, swollen by time and the work of ploughmen – towered the enemy's positions. Hitler's generals and officers had observation posts on the gentle slopes of these mounds, and our scouts sometimes spotted the glint of binoculars there.

There was no source of fresh water in the bridgehead. We imagined with a shudder the unbearable heat and thirst here on cloudless days in summer, but in February and March, the cold wind was constantly from the east and northeast. These winds would then alternate at random with warm air from the south. It could be warm, raining, snowing, or even sunny, and then there would once more be an angry gust of cold wind from the east or north.

Life in the bridgehead set new challenges for commander and political officers in corps and divisions. Soldiers in wartime have to eat, drink, and live somewhere, warm themselves and dry their clothes. Although there was little fuel, it was necessary to prepare hot food for the troops ...

Preparations for the offensive developed at full speed. Unit replenishments arrived and combat training took place. Day and night many men and vehicles were engaged in strengthening bridges and the causeway across the Sivash. And then nature turned against us: at the end of February there was a powerful storm and the bridges were destroyed. The work of detached subunits and of engineers and sappers from corps and army level was completely obliterated by the raging elements. We had to start from scratch. It was especially annoying that the logs and beams, which were brought laboriously to the crossing point, were swept out to sea ...

But nobody was discouraged. Although the conditions in which we prepared for the offensive were extremely difficult, commanders and political officers did not neglect the basic needs of the soldiers. And individual solders often resorted to their own strength and ingenuity. The ability to find solutions to seemingly hopeless situations was a recurring feature amongst our men.[18]

One such solution devised by the men was to use a large half-destroyed barn for accommodation. The soldiers found that it had been used by locals to store horse manure, and one man with agricultural knowledge realised that if it was slightly dampened, it would start to decompose and would generate heat. Accordingly, greatcoats were placed on the damp dung and the men took turns to sleep in the warm, if pungent, building. Soldiers also discovered that it was possible to tunnel into the saltier parts of the bridgehead to create bunkers where they could take cover from the regular German shelling. In the bridgehead near Kerch, soldiers resorted to a more hazardous means of keeping themselves warm:

> Being sappers, they knew all the technical tricks. They used captured anti-tank mines, melting the explosive out of them and then burning it in their stove. It burned very evenly and without any smoke. Their neighbours wanted to know what they used for fuel but they kept their secret to themselves.[19]

In early March, Vasilevsky visited 4th Ukrainian Front for further discussions about the forthcoming operation, and met Tolbukhin and Zakharov, the commander of Second Guards Army. He sent back a detailed report to Stalin:

> The rain of yesterday and today has completely put the roads out of use. All our motor transport has got bogged down in the mud. Only the tractors can operate somehow. We had to give up our attempts to get through to Kreizer by motor vehicle and we flew in a Po-2 [Polykarpov biplane]. With such road conditions we cannot begin the operation, we cannot transfer guns or shells to the advancing troops, nor even provisions and kitchens. What's more, the Sivash crossings brought down by storms in the last few days of February are being repaired slowly owing to the lack of timber. On the basis of all that I have personally seen and on the basis of reports from those who have had a direct hand in the operations, I think that the Crimean Operation can only begin between 15 and 20 March … I would ask you to ratify the given dates.[20]

Stalin had no real choice but to agree to the delay. After a meeting involving Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a long-time associate of Stalin who was, like Vasilevsky, acting as a special representative of *Stavka*, the two men sent a further signal to Stalin stressing the importance of trying to disrupt German maritime movements. To that end, they asked that the Black Sea Fleet's air power be strengthened and submarines deployed. Further difficulties with the weather required another postponement of the attack, which was now tentatively scheduled for 5 April; even this proved to be too optimistic, leading to a delay of a further three days. Supplies were steadily stockpiled in preparation for the assault; Koshevoi recorded that his artillery had sufficient ammunition for perhaps three or four days of continuous action, and there was sufficient food to support the troops for ten days. Fuel remained an issue, with only enough for two days of operations.[21]

It was of course impossible to hide preparations from the Germans, who accordingly strengthened their defences. Three lines of fortifications were built at both Perekop and Sivash, and although Hitler refused to give permission for a withdrawal to Ishun, where it would have been possible to build a single defensive line to cover the threat from both Soviet groups to the north, Jaenecke was able to console himself that he had done all he could. He issued orders for the construction of a defensive line near Sevastopol, given the title 'Gneisenau Line', but work on this proceeded at a slow pace. Aware that, despite his best efforts, his troops would not be able to hold out against a major Soviet offensive indefinitely, Jaenecke also instructed his staff to start revising earlier work on a seaborne evacuation – if this became necessary, he wanted to have all the required plans in place in advance.

Early on 8 April, the artillery of the two Soviet armies of 4th Ukrainian Front began their preparatory bombardment, which continued for over two hours. The previous day, the Soviet Eighth Air Army had carried out a series of raids on German airfields in an attempt to establish air superiority; these attacks were only partially successful and on the morning of the assault, aircraft of both sides were constantly overhead. Despite the skill of the veteran pilots of the Luftwaffe's *Jagdgeschwader 52*, there were too many Soviet aircraft to intercept and front-line units, support formations and rear areas all came under repeated attack. In mid-morning, the ground forces opened their offensive. Kreizer's Fifty-First Army attacked with I Guards Rifle Corps on the right wing as the main point of effort and advanced into a hail of fire from the German and Romanian positions. Despite calling down further artillery fire to suppress the defences, the Soviet troops made only slow progress. It was only on the extreme right flank that the infantry managed to penetrate into the defensive line, wading through the waters on the eastern shore of Lake Aigulskoye in the early afternoon and driving back the Romanian troops defending that sector. Years of experience had taught the Soviet commanders to expect a counterattack and as soon as they spotted infantry gathering in the trenches opposite their positions, they called down artillery fire. The German counterattack stalled almost before it had begun.

At Perekop, Second Guards Army attacked with just one rifle corps. Advancing under cover of a smokescreen and supported by assault guns and flamethrower tanks, the leading division rapidly pushed into Armiansk, but was unable to sustain the momentum of the attack when the Soviet tanks and infantry found themselves in a dense minefield. The German defenders were mainly from *Gruppe Konrad*, a corps-sized group. Generalleutnant Friedrich Sixt's 50th Infantry Division bore the brunt of the attack and was forced back, despite being supported by a number of assault guns; by the end of the day, a complete breakthrough by the Red Army had been prevented, but German reserves were effectively exhausted.

During the night, Koshevoi, Kreizer and Tolbukhin discussed the situation at length. The second echelon of the attacking units was to enter the battle at dawn, and 32nd Guards Tank Brigade, which had suffered substantial losses when it encountered a battalion of German assault guns, was to support the advance on the western flank. Additional artillery assets were also assigned to aid the breakthrough. The intention to attack at first light on 9 April had to be postponed until all of the second echelon was in place, but then the attackers ground forward remorselessly. Casualties were heavy, but the conclusion was never really in doubt. During the afternoon, the German defences facing the Red Army's attacks both at Perekop and Sivash gave way under the relentless pressure and a group of tanks from 32nd Guards Tank Brigade motored south through the breach that had been created. XIX Tank Corps began to cross into the Sivash bridgehead with the intention of thrusting south as quickly as possible. As they arrived, the tank units were ordered south, and rapidly reached and captured the town of Dzhankoi, an important supply centre for *Gruppe Konrad* and astride the main road running south from Sivash. The northern half of the Crimean peninsula is relatively flat, and the increasingly swift advance of Soviet tanks was a development that Jaenecke and his subordinates had feared: there was no defensive position that could be created that would allow a new line to be established, even if sufficient troops had been available.

The plans that had been drawn up by Seventeenth Army for an evacuation of Crimea evolved through several iterations during the winter. The latest version – codenamed *Adler* – involved a phased withdrawal to a line close to Sevastopol, from where it was hoped the army could be taken to safety by sea. Without seeking approval from *OKH* – such approval would either not be given, or would involve delays and prevarication and would then be granted too late – Jaenecke issued orders for *Adler* to commence that evening. In the east, V Corps was to destroy the port facilities in Kerch and begin its withdrawal towards Sevastopol, and in the north, *Gruppe Konrad* was to pull back to Ishun as a first step. To complicate matters still further, General Rudolf Konrad found himself having to deal with another Soviet amphibious attack. A single battalion was put ashore behind the left flank of *Gruppe Konrad* and successfully fended off a counterattack by a small group of German infantry backed by assault guns. Although the bridgehead was too small to be a direct threat, the diversion of troops even to screen it off was sufficient to make any prolonged defence of the current positions impossible, regardless of whether *OKH* should seek to overrule Jaenecke's implementation of *Adler*. Forced to abandon much of its supporting artillery and under constant air attack, the German 50th Infantry Division pulled back to the Ishun line, only to find that the rapid advance of the Soviet XIX Tank Corps from Sivash had already outflanked the position. Konrad signalled Jaenecke that he was pulling back to the Gneisenau line.

With the northern approaches to Crimea firmly in the hands of the Red Army, the German V Corps began to withdraw from its positions at Kerch. The original intention of the Soviet plan had been for the Coastal Army to attack and pin down the Germans to prevent such a withdrawal, and as his troops threw themselves at the German defences at Perekop and Sivash, Tolbukhin asked Vasilevsky to spur Eremenko into action. The attack on the Kerch peninsula was planned for the morning of 11 April and, perhaps stung by Vasilevsky urging him to show greater alacrity, Eremenko ordered energetic reconnaissance probes on 10 April. These confirmed what had already been increasingly clear from aerial reconnaissance and other sources: the Germans were about to withdraw from their defences. The reconnaissance probes, together with interrogation of a small number of prisoners, confirmed the imminent withdrawal of the Germans and a full assault was launched as planned on 11 April. By mid-afternoon, the German defences that had proved so difficult to overcome during the winter were firmly in Soviet hands and the port of Kerch had been captured, though not before the Germans had destroyed most of its facilities. Throughout the day, Soviet aircraft harassed the retreating German columns, which were all obliged to use the single main road running west. Several small groups of German soldiers were either overwhelmed or encircled and forced to surrender.

It seems that the German order to pull back from Kerch was unexpected for some of the troops in the front line. An officer of the German 282nd Infantry Regiment, part of 98th Infantry Division, later described the hasty withdrawal:

> The order to pull back our first battalion was issued late on 10 April. Before that, none of the soldiers or officers of the battalion had received any official notification

> of an impending withdrawal. Even during the morning [of 10 April], the soldiers were talking about the future prospects for the German and Romanian troops in Crimea and discussing the possible Soviet offensive. Our battalion was ordered to move 30km [18 miles] west from the positions it was occupying. Arriving at the command post, where there were meant to be vehicles for embarkation, the battalion found not only no vehicles, but also not a single senior officer. Seeing that their commanders had hastily departed, leaving the troops to the mercy of fate, some soldiers decided to remain in their positions and surrender.
>
> During the column's march, Russian tanks attacked, and as a result many men took shelter and those who tried to flee were subjected to heavy shelling. The Russian infantry, who came up with the tanks, captured most of the battalion's personnel. I was captured with a group of about 30. A similar group was captured not far from us.[22]

Despite the widespread chaos, most of V Corps succeeded in reaching the Parpach Narrows at the base of the Kerch peninsula, but there was little point in attempting to dig in and defend this position – the Soviet armour streaming down from the north was rapidly approaching Simferopol, threatening to cut off V Corps in eastern Crimea. Deciding that it was now too late for the slow-moving German columns of V Corps to pull back through Simferopol towards Sevastopol, Jaenecke ordered Allmendinger, commander of V Corps, to fall back on the ports of Feodosia and Sudak on the southern coast. From there, he and his troops would be evacuated by sea.

Hitler's obstinate determination to hold onto Crimea was, as has already been described, based upon the belief that its loss would allow Soviet bombers to strike at Romanian oil facilities, and a view that the units of Seventeenth Army were tying down a disproportionate number of Soviet troops. The former argument was largely invalid even before the Soviet attack began, as British and American bombers were already bombing Romania's oil wells and refineries, and the rapid loss of much of the Crimean peninsula now gave the Soviet bomber squadrons the bases that Hitler had wanted to withhold from them. The swift advance of Tolbukhin's troops after they overcame *Gruppe Konrad* made the second argument equally invalid – even if the remaining units of Seventeenth Army were able to hold onto a small part of Crimea, the Red Army could either attack in strength and destroy them or screen them off and transfer troops elsewhere. But Hitler's deep-seated reluctance to abandon territory now prevailed. Sevastopol had already been declared a 'fortress', and Jaenecke was ordered to hold the city at all costs. He would be supplied by sea, and eventually the fortress could be used as a springboard for a new offensive to recapture the rest of the peninsula. Inevitably, Hitler offered no clarity of when such a renewed advance might be possible, or where the troops for such an advance would be found – in keeping with his declared strategy, such an operation would probably have to wait until the expected invasion attempt by the Western Allies had been crushed. Hitler's belief in the strength of Sevastopol was also misplaced. The city had endured powerful German attacks in 1942 before it fell and the German Eleventh Army – commanded by Manstein at the time – paid a heavy price in casualties for its victory, but almost nothing had been done in the intervening months to repair the fortifications.

On the battlefield, the Soviet commanders were dealing with the problems of success. The rapid advance in the north, together with the German retreat in the east, became a source of concern for Kreizer, commander of Fifty-First Army. On the morning of 12 April, he contacted Koshevoi and warned him that the retreating Germans left in the wake of the advance might be able to concentrate sufficient forces to threaten the eastern flank of the army; Koshevoi was ordered to deploy 'at least a regiment', reinforced with artillery, to protect the open flank. Koshevoi's initial reaction was that his forces were already fully committed, but after discussing the matter with his chief of staff, concluded that a blocking unit at Zuya, a short distance to the northeast of Simferopol, would be sufficient to block any such German attack. This town sat astride the main road running west from Feodosia, and the only other practical route for the Germans – both as a line of retreat to the west and to threaten the Soviet advance – was the narrow and winding road along the coast. The bridges over the Zuya and Fundukly Rivers, which flowed through the town, would allow a relatively small force to stop the Germans. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Ivanovich Sukhovorov, who was the deputy commander of one of Koshevoi's divisions, a reinforced artillery regiment was ordered to proceed to Zuya at full speed. Trying to avoid contact with any German units in his path, Sukhovorov motored south as fast as he could. A few miles north of his objective, he ran into a retreating German column and rather than waste time trying to bypass it, he assaulted it with his infantry and assault guns, rapidly overwhelming it. When they reached Zuya, the Soviet troops had a brief firefight with the small garrison and took up defensive positions in anticipation of the arrival of German units from the east.

When his troops reached Feodosia, Allmendinger rapidly concluded that prolonged resistance in the city was almost impossible and ordered the retreat to continue. The pursuing Soviet troops, led by a rifle division reinforced by an independent tank brigade, reached and captured the abandoned city on 13 April. At the same time, XIX Tank Corps continued to motor south and reached Simferopol, blocking any possibility of the German V Corps retreating by land to Sevastopol. Allmendinger ordered a regiment to defend the road running south through the coastal mountains to Sudak, while two Romanian battalions formed a rearguard on the Feodosia-Sudak coastal road. At the same time, another German column – perhaps failing to receive orders to turn south to Sudak – continued west towards Simferopol. Before dawn on 13 April, it ran into Koshevoi's blocking unit at Zuya. A small but fierce battle broke out; rapidly recovering from their initial shock when they came under heavy fire, the Germans managed to storm and capture the bridge over the Zuya River and pressed into the town itself, but Sukhovorov had deliberately left a small detachment to the north, and this now moved to attack the Germans in their flank. This effectively ended any chance of the German group – a mixed force from 73rd and 98th Infantry Divisions – breaking through to the west. In any case, even if they had done so, Simferopol was already in Soviet hands. Fighting continued into 13 April until the leading elements of the Soviet Coastal Army arrived from the east, forcing the remaining Germans to surrender.[23]

Allmendinger's V Corps was now pinned to the coast around Sudak. Several military ferries – flat-bottomed vessels, capable of being used as improvised landing craft – were available for the evacuation and immediately began to transport troops west to Balaklava and Sevastopol. The journey of about 84 miles (140km) took the ferries about ten hours, and Soviet aircraft soon intervened. With many of its airfields being overrun, much of the Luftwaffe in the Crimean peninsula was in the process of transferring its planes and equipment to airfields closer to Sevastopol and there was little intervention by German fighters, resulting in many of the ferries being machine-gunned. The two Romanian battalions in the rearguard fought well against the leading elements of Eremenko's Coastal Army and fell back steadily towards the coast and then along the coast road to the southwest, where they had been promised that boats would be awaiting them. However, when they reached the small port of Alushta, they found the town had already been abandoned. The Red Army had cut the road further southwest between Alushta and Yalta, and the surviving soldiers turned inland to try to slip through to the west. Cohesion of the two battalions deteriorated, and the increasingly scattered men were hunted down and killed or captured – only three Romanians managed to reach Sevastopol. Generalleutnant Hugo Schwab was the commander of the Romanian Mountain Corps from which these two battalions had been deployed. He was a former officer of the *Kaiserliche und*

Königliche ('Imperial and Royal', reflecting that the monarch was Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary) Army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had been taken prisoner by the Russians during the First World War. When he was released in 1919, he chose to join the Romanian Army, as he was a native of Transylvania and the region was now part of Romania. He was furious that the promised evacuation did not take place, but this was entirely in character with the manner in which the Germans treated their allies. During the retreat from the Don in late 1942 and early 1943, German units repeatedly refused to share supplies, transport and ammunition with Romanian, Italian and Hungarian soldiers, and whilst German accounts frequently blamed setbacks on their allies retreating without informing German units, the Germans often pulled back with little or no regard for the consequences for troops of other nationalities. On some occasions during the retreat after the Stalingrad encirclement, the Germans even appropriated the vehicles of their allies or forced them out of buildings into the cold so that the Germans could take shelter. Relations between the Romanians and Germans in Crimea had been deteriorating for some time, and episodes like this only accelerated the deterioration.

A total of about 10,000 men from V Corps succeeded in reaching safety via the sea route, but large numbers of men were left to try to infiltrate west via the coastal mountains. A large group, including Allmendinger and his staff, moved down the coastal road before the Red Army cut the road and isolated the rearguard. They reached Yalta on 15 April and, with no pursuit in sight, largely due to the valiant rearguard action of the Romanians, Allmendinger chose to have a pause in the retreat. It was only when other officers – particularly Schwab, who was understandably angered that the precious time bought by his men was being squandered in this way, and Generalleutnant Alfred Reinhardt, commander of 98th Infantry Division – urged greater haste, that Allmendinger resumed the retreat. The following day, the column reached Sevastopol. The chaotic withdrawal had cost V Corps most of its heavy weapons and rear area equipment, and every unit had lost large numbers of men. Some of these continued to trickle through in small numbers in the days that followed.

Gruppe Konrad did rather better than V Corps. With its retreat covered by a battalion of assault guns, it managed to pull back in relatively good order and kept much of its artillery and other equipment intact. Nevertheless, the retreat towards Sevastopol became something of an uneven race between the relatively slow infantry of *Gruppe Konrad* and the tanks of XIX Tank Corps. The German and Romanian units repeatedly found themselves surrounded, either as individual units or en masse. On 14 April, Soviet tanks reached Bakhchisarai, about 18 miles

(30km) northeast of Sevastopol, and effectively cut the road between the retreating Axis troops and the port. A small force from the 'garrison' of Fortress Sevastopol, commanded personally by the designated fortress commandant, Oberst Paul Betz, succeeded in blocking any further Soviet advance for half a day, allowing most of *Gruppe Konrad* to slip through to safety. Nevertheless, several Romanian battalions were destroyed during the retreat, either overwhelmed by the Red Army or choosing to surrender rather than continue the uneven struggle. Eremenko later claimed that the advancing Soviet troops took over 17,000 prisoners by the end of 14 April; Seventeenth Army recorded the loss of nearly 30,000 men in the same period.[24]

As they advanced, the Red Army units often dealt out arbitrary justice to the occupying forces. Stepan Trofimovich Shramenko was a 19-year-old who had lived through the German occupation, peripherally involved in partisan activity. He recalled the moment when Soviet troops arrived in his village on 12 April and clashed with a group of Romanians in a horse-drawn cart:

> Suddenly, there was a burst of machine-gun fire. It passed to the right of the Romanian cart. A motorcycle with sidecar appeared, armed with a Degtyarev [Soviet machine-gun]. I immediately threw myself to the ground to avoid being shot accidentally. I shouted but the Soviet motorcyclists didn't even notice me. They rushed to the Romanians and I ran home. I ran into the yard, shouting, 'Mother, our men are here!' She collapsed through joy. I ran back into the street to see where the soldiers had gone.
>
> I heard some sudden noise from a nearby yard. I ran through the open gate. Everyone from our street was there. The Romanians were surrounded by civilians and the motorcyclists. Valentina Demina [one of the elderly residents of the village] ran over to a Romanian and started hitting him. She shouted, 'You bastard, you took my sewing machine!' Someone had obviously taken her sewing machine, but how could we tell who exactly had done it? The soldiers ordered us to step aside. The Romanians were shot on the spot. I saw it at close range, and my eyes were glued to it. When a person is shot at close range, his belly bursts open and half-digested pieces of food fall out. It was a hideous scene. And in addition to the joy of liberation, I began to feel fear too.[25]

Despite the generally low opinion held by the Germans of the Romanians, it was the Romanian troops of Schwab's corps that formed the first line of defence around Sevastopol; the German units that had retreated to the city were too disorganised to be able to put up much resistance. On 15 April, the Soviet

XIX Tank Corps began to probe the defences but was beaten off with the Romanians claiming the destruction of over 20 tanks. Sevastopol had put up considerable resistance to the Germans in 1942, and Tolbukhin was concerned that a hasty attempt to overrun the defences might prove costly. He therefore ordered XIX Tank Corps to limit itself to local attacks while the rest of 4th Ukrainian Front moved up in support. From the east, Eremenko urged his troops to make haste and to overwhelm the retreating forces before them. In his memoirs, he described how the partisans aided his men greatly, and that in some cases his men reached towns to find the partisans already engaged in combat with the Germans and Romanians, but other sources suggest that the partisans played little part in the fighting.[26] Given the losses inflicted on the partisans by the Romanian anti-partisan operation earlier in the year, it is likely that there may have been local battles where relatively undamaged partisan formations rose up against the Axis forces, but others were too badly disrupted to contribute much to the fighting. But even if the retreating enemy put up little robust resistance, there were still dangers for even senior officers, as Eremenko discovered on 15 April:

> In the Angarsk gorge, about 200m from the obelisk erected in honour of Marshal Kutuzov (the hero of the 1812 French invasion of Russia), I was wounded for the third time. Admittedly, it was only a slight wound in my arm … Impressed by the events of the preceding day, I decided to accompany the troops advancing to the Chatyr-Dag pass [northwest of Alushta]. I wanted to understand the situation in order to issue new orders to the troops … Early on 15 April I left the command post in Feodosia and drove up to the pass. Parts of the mobile groups heading down the road to Alushta were stationary. The winding road passed through the gorge. It was packed with tanks, trucks, artillery and troops … All stood and waited for the front to move forward. Continuing by car was impossible. With two security guards and an officer aide, I made my way forward through the vehicles and personnel. When I encountered soldiers and officers who I had already met, I chatted briefly with them and it was obvious that everyone was buoyed by our success. When I approached the leading unit, I was met by Lieutenant Colonel Kravchenko, commander of 15th Guards Rifle Regiment, who reported on the situation. The road was under fire from the enemy on the heights at three points just short of the pass. He added that the roads were mined and widely flooded, and a disabled tank and two trucks were stuck at a bend. Movement along the road was impossible and only infantry could pass through. The engineers and soldiers of other units cleared the way but things went rather slowly. I ordered the wrecked vehicles to be dumped into the gorge and an attack

> made on the pass. The infantry and the sailors [from a naval battalion] spread out across the gorge and attacked with loud shouts. At this moment I was in a trench, watching the progress of the battle. Apparently spotting our group of senior officers, the enemy opened rapid fire with mortars. One shell exploded almost next to me and shrapnel hit my right hand. Moments later the pass was captured, and the Nazis discarded their guns and mortars and fled towards the sea through the forest. Our tanks, with infantry mounted aboard, led the pursuit.[27]

It proved to be the last part that Eremenko would play in the liberation of the Crimean peninsula. The peninsula had been almost completely recaptured by the Red Army and was no longer regarded as a major priority, and *Stavka* had turned its attention to plans for the summer, which would see the massive blow that would effectively destroy the German Army Group Centre. A man of Eremenko's skills and experience would be needed to help plan this new operation, and he was ordered to return to Moscow. Command of the Coastal Army – which was now assigned to Tolbukhin's 4th Ukrainian Front – passed to Lieutenant General Kondrat Semenovich Melnik, who had been the army's deputy commander since the late autumn of 1943. Together with the commanders of Fifty-First Army and Second Guards Army, he ordered his men to attack the German defences on the approaches to Sevastopol on 19 and 23 April, but there was no progress. The stockpiles of artillery ammunition that had been built up prior to the offensive had either been expended or were still being brought forward, and without an effective artillery bombardment, the German and Romanian units were able to make good use of the rugged terrain to repulse the Soviet thrusts, despite being barely one third of their establishment strength.

Jaenecke had been given permission to evacuate non-military personnel from Crimea and began to move civilians, rear area troops and wounded to Romania by sea as early as 12 April. In addition to the limited resources of the *Kriegsmarine*, he had several Romanian vessels at his disposal and, with a healthy degree of air cover, the evacuation began in an orderly manner. In barely a week, about 20,000 people were moved to safety almost without loss, including large numbers of Romanian soldiers – regardless of Hitler's orders, the Romanians had no intention of allowing their men to be trapped and destroyed in the so-called fortress. Belatedly, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet tried to intercept, but its initial attempts to attack the well-protected convoys with a submarine attack failed with the loss of the submarine. Amongst the equipment provided to the Soviet Union by the Western Allies were over 600 Douglas A-20B Havoc bombers, and two formations of these – one equipped for mine laying and the other as a bomber unit – were ordered to intervene. The A-20 was a popular aircraft with its pilots on account of its manoeuvrability, but Soviet bomber units had in the past suffered heavy losses because the aircraft was often used in very low-level attacks on well-armed German shipping. When the bombers attempted to interdict the evacuation convoys, they had mixed results. A few ships were damaged, unfortunately including one that was carrying a large number of Soviet prisoners of war, several hundred of whom were killed in the attack, but several aircraft were shot down and another submarine was lost before the end of April. By this stage, the evacuation had brought nearly 72,000 people west.

A few replacement drafts – a total of fewer than 2,000 men – were sent to Seventeenth Army, but Jaenecke had no illusions about the ability of his troops to hold out for long in Sevastopol. He issued an order of the day on 24 April urging all troops in his command to hold on and believe in their final victory, but he also signalled *OKH* with a frank and accurate appraisal of his situation. Given that he did not think that he would be able to defend the 'fortress' for long, he requested freedom of action to commence a complete evacuation, or sufficient reinforcements to make such an evacuation unnecessary. After learning that Jaenecke had already commenced evacuation planning before the Soviet offensive broke, Hitler had grumbled to his entourage that Jaenecke appeared to have lost his nerve, but had felt he had little choice but to acquiesce to those plans being drawn up and for rear area units and wounded men to be withdrawn. Now – when the commander of Seventeenth Army made similar requests to those that cost Manstein his command – Jaenecke was summoned back to Germany on 29 April, despite Schörner endorsing his subordinate's views. Jaenecke flew to Berchtesgaden where he met Hitler for what proved to be a stormy meeting.

Jaenecke started by describing the situation that Seventeenth Army faced. It had lost much of its heavy equipment and personnel and was now confined to Fortress Sevastopol, and thus had no space for manoeuvre, even if it had the motorised forces for such manoeuvres. Consequently, it would be forced to fight a battle in which the superior numbers of men and artillery that the Red Army possessed would be decisive. All military and political considerations for remaining in Sevastopol were no longer valid, and it was therefore essential that, unless significant reinforcements were made available immediately, the remaining troops should be evacuated by sea without delay. Any other course of action would inevitably lead to the destruction of the entire army.

Hitler responded by promising reinforcements, but when pressed by Jaenecke for details, he told the army commander that he would receive just four battalions. Jaenecke replied that in these circumstances, he requested that Seventeenth Army should come under the direct control of *OKH* – in other words, he did not want to command an army that was doomed to destruction. When Manstein had made reports that he didn't wish to hear, Hitler had been able to maintain an icy calm, but on this occasion he lost his temper almost immediately, raging at Jaenecke for daring to speak to him in this manner. Even as he launched into his usual tirade about the importance of holding on stubbornly to every inch of ground, Jaenecke stunned everyone present by simply turning and walking out of the room, slamming the door as he left. As he passed Hitler's startled adjutant, he told him to tell the Führer that he had left and returned to the airfield, where his plane was waiting.[28]

Jaenecke clearly intended to return to his headquarters, but when his plane landed in Romania to refuel, he was placed under arrest on Hitler's orders. He was dismissed from command of Seventeenth Army on the grounds that 'he could no longer be entirely trusted to bring the battle for Sevastopol to a successful conclusion in accordance with the orders he had been given'.[29] Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, who was serving as Inspector General of Armoured Forces at the time, was instructed to conduct an enquiry with a view to holding a court martial; Guderian proceeded as slowly as he reasonably could, and the enquiry predictably got nowhere and was forgotten. In January 1945 Jaenecke wrote a personal letter to Hitler pointing out that the war was irretrievably lost and that the Führer should act accordingly, i.e. ask for a ceasefire; this led to his immediate dismissal. After the war he was handed over to the Soviet Union as a prisoner and tried for war crimes – appropriately, in Sevastopol, as many of the crimes related the German occupation of the Crimean peninsula – and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment. Together with most of the others who were similarly convicted, he was released in 1955.

Jaenecke's replacement as commander of Seventeenth Army was a curious choice: Karl Allmendinger, who had commanded V Corps in the Kerch peninsula. Even before his men had completed their costly withdrawal to Sevastopol, Allmendinger had left his command to take a week's leave, but Hitler clearly believed that he would follow orders without question. His replacement as commander of V Corps was Generalleutnant Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller; an indication of why Hitler chose him can be seen in his conduct both before and after his time in Crimea. In 1943, after the Italians broke away from Germany, he commanded soldiers on the Greek island of Kos to kill over 100 Italian officers who had been captured after refusing to remain loyal to the Axis. In the summer of 1944, Müller returned to the Mediterranean and became the commandant of 'Fortress Crete'. He was about to be replaced by Generalmajor Heinrich Kreipe, but returned to Crete after his successor was abducted by partisans and British agents. He then issued an infamous order:

> As the town of Anogeia is a centre of English espionage activity in Crete, as the inhabitants of Anogeia have carried out sabotage of Damasta, as the partisans of various resistance groups in Anogeia find shelter and protection and since the abductors of General Kreipe have taken their way through Anogeia, and they have used Anogeia as a base for the shipment of supplies, we order the town to be levelled and every male resident of Anogeia within the village or the area up to a radius of 1km to be hanged.[30]

After the war, he was captured by the Red Army and handed over to the Greeks in 1946. He was convicted of the destruction of Anogeia and the unlawful killing of about 25 people – mainly the elderly and disabled who were unable to flee when the Germans arrived – and executed in 1947.

Meanwhile the advancing Soviet units swiftly rounded up local men to try to keep their ranks up to strength. Shramenko, the 19-year-old who had witnessed the summary execution of a group of Romanians, was one such recruit:

> I was called into the Red Army on 22 April. A group of draftees gathered and we were sent to Sevastopol …
>
> We were fitted out with clothing. My feet were size 45, and there were no boots of the right size. The quartermaster searched through one heap, then a second. He found size 44 boots. 'Yes, that's better than nothing,' said the quartermaster. 'Just soak your footcloths [used in the Red Army instead of socks] in water and they'll be fine.' We washed and shaved. I put on my boots. As we marched on my feet began to ache. They felt like they were being squeezed, and it was barely tolerable.[31]

The German positions continued to come under pressure. Tolbukhin ordered his armies to renew their attacks on the Sevastopol perimeter on 1 May; during an artillery bombardment, Sixt, commander of 50th Infantry Division, was wounded and joined those who were being evacuated from the peninsula. Koshevoi's corps struggled to make any progress due to well-sited German positions:

> Amongst the chain of dominating heights on the outskirts of Sevastopol was Sugarloaf Mountain. This damned mass of white limestone was next to Mount

> Sapun, and overlooked the junction with our neighbour to the right, [Lieutenant General Ivan Ilyich] Missan's I Guards Rifle Corps. The Germans deployed a strong defensive unit on Sugarloaf with large numbers of long-range weapons. Every metre of land on the approaches and the slopes of the mountain was plastered with land mines and barbed wire, and covered by interlocking fields of fire. Relying on this, the enemy commanded the Inkerman Valley and flanking fire prevented us from approaching Mount Sapun. When we tried to attack, we were hit by a flurry of accurate fire. In addition, there was a threat of counterattack. In order to try to protect ourselves, I had to turn the right flank 417th Rifle Division towards Sugarloaf.
>
> Relying on Sugarloaf and Sapun, the Hitlerite command had created a solid defensive centre that allowed them to control the coastal flank where … the main attack was planned and the main forces of 4th Ukrainian Front were concentrated. In this manner, the enemy blocked the general assault on the German defences in the Sevastopol outskirts.
>
> Sugarloaf became a thorn in the side of the army and the Front, not to mention I Guards Corps and my corps.
>
> … Missan did all he could to capture Sugarloaf, but day after day went by, losses increased, and there was still no success.[32]

Kreizer and Tolbukhin met the corps commanders to discuss the issue and concluded that it was pointless to attack Mount Sapun until Sugarloaf had been captured. Koshevoi then had a stroke of good fortune: a raiding party that infiltrated into the German positions found a map on a dead German soldier outlining the defensive positions on Mount Sapun. Planning now began for a comprehensive attack in the sector, scheduled for 7 May. Two days before this attack, Second Guards Army resumed its attacks a little to the north, smashing its way into the German lines; despite extensive artillery and air support, the attack gained only 1,000m of ground before being brought to a halt. The following day, there was a further assault, and once more the advance was very modest; rather more significantly, interrogation of a German prisoner captured late in the day revealed that he and several other men had been transferred from the Mount Sapun sector in order to try to stop the attack by Second Guards Army. Missan's I Guards Rifle Corps managed to penetrate the German defences on Sugarloaf, reducing greatly the threat of flanking fire or a counterattack from there against Koshevoi's attack on Mount Sapun, and after the customary heavy artillery bombardment, LXIII Rifle Corps made its attack. Despite the capture of the map a few days earlier, the attackers found that the artillery bombardment had done little to break up the German defences and progress was slow and costly through multiple barbed wire entanglements and scattered mines, all swept by German fire. In some cases, the Soviet troops were able to call in effective artillery support; in others, they paid a heavy price to suppress the defences. Attack was followed by counterattack with some positions repeatedly changing hands. In the early afternoon, much of the German first line of defences was in Soviet hands and in many areas parts of the second line had also been overrun. The battle continued in undiminished intensity all afternoon, as Koshevoi later wrote:

> It was 1800. There remained 100–200m of ground before we reached the crest of Mount Sapun. But what metres they were! The mountain shook from the explosion of shells. Rocks and the concrete slabs of German fortifications cracked and shattered. Thousands of hot steel shards whistled through the air and lay burning on the ground. It seemed impossible that anyone could be alive in that place, but the enemy continued to resist.
>
> At about this time, the attackers began to run out of ammunition. The artillery commanders of all three divisions reported to me that they had 15–20 rounds per gun. This amount of ammunition formed the emergency stock and had to be saved.
>
> ... The situation became critical. If the battalions didn't succeed in climbing to the crest and securing a foothold, they would be rolled back easily when the enemy counterattacked if they didn't have enough shells.
>
> We considered the options one after another, but none seemed right. Suddenly my eye was caught by Soviet attack aircraft from Lieutenant General Vasili Georgievich Riazanov's I Guards Air Assault Corps. The planes were completing an attack on Mount Sapun and we had been assigned an air liaison officer, Major Kapustin, who was with me and directed aircraft onto their targets. He told me that they were returning to their airfield. I then made my decision: the assault planes would stay and do what the artillery could no longer do.
>
> I called [Lieutenant] General [Timofei Timofeevich] Khryukin, commander of Eighth Air Army. His command post was only 800m from me. I briefly explained the situation and asked him to keep both squadrons of planes over the battlefield, and to make two more attacks. Khryukin promised to help, though he knew his aviators had completed their assigned missions. 'You have your liaison officer,' he advised, 'give the command to the planes through him or directly.'
>
> Kapustin quickly contacted the attack aircraft. I took the microphone and spoke without code: 'Koshevoi here. Make two more passes over the heights. It's vital.'

> ‘But sir,’ replied the pilot, ‘we’re out of peas.’ This meant that they had run out of ammunition.
>
> ‘Nevertheless, I beg you to make two more passes,’ I said. ‘It’s vital.’
>
> Then, despite strong enemy anti-aircraft fire, the planes turned and with a roar swept down on the enemy on the crest. The Germans soldiers, not knowing that the planes were out of ‘peas’, quickly took shelter. The enemy’s defensive fire against us was noticeably weaker.
>
> The infantry took advantage of this. The soldiers storming the crest of the mountain also believed that the planes were providing supporting fire, took heart and swept forward. The gunners fired over open sights and hit the enemy’s fire positions with their last rounds.
>
> The minutes seemed to last forever. But finally, the line of attacking groups came very close to the Sapun ridge.[33]

Despite heavy losses, Koshevoi’s LXIII Rifle Corps had secured the much-needed foothold on the crest of Mount Sapun. Aware of the casualties that the attack had cost, Kreizer dispatched the relatively fresh X Rifle Corps to secure the hard-won high ground. At the same time, Second Guards Army clawed its way to and over the Belbek River a little to the north.

Shramenko and the other men who had been summarily drafted into the army were undergoing a baptism of fire after the most rudimentary training:

> On 1 May, we were organised into platoons. We replenished the units that had suffered losses in the capture of Perekop. We were young and untested, and were put in the second echelon. The leading units were manned with veterans and prisoners of war released in Crimea. They knew how to fight. The attack was a form of rehabilitation for the former prisoners. Anyone who survived was acquitted of any offences, so they were eager to go into action. [Soviet soldiers who had surrendered without being wounded were often treated with suspicion by the Red Army after liberation until they ‘proved’ themselves.]
>
> I was sent to replenish 589th Infantry Regiment in 216th Rifle Division. I was assigned to an anti-tank rifle company’s first platoon … Training began. We trained for five days … [After the first day] We turned in. About 300m from us was a small hillock. It was a cold night and we rolled ourselves in our overcoats. I asked the NCO if we could go behind the hillock [to shelter from the wind]. He agreed. I started to doze off. Then I heard a shell flying through the air. I rolled into a nearby ditch. There was an explosion. Gregory Spilney and another guy from our village were killed by shrapnel. A Siberian was also killed. At first

> everyone scattered, but then we returned and buried our comrades. Thus ended my first day at the front.
>
> We trained for two more days – that was all. Late on 6 May we set off. We marched for a long time but then for some reason or other returned to where we had started. We set off again and occupied some high ground. We were warned not to move. Our hill was clearly visible to the enemy in Sevastopol. We could even see the bay from our hill, so we had to keep still … The hill was dotted with human bones and helmets – Soviet, Romanian, and German. Apparently there had been a battle there [in 1942] during the defence of Sevastopol. In one dugout, or rather just a big hole, I saw a boot and a leg in army trousers sticking out. I accidentally brushed against it and it fell to the ground. I was horrified. The smell of death was everywhere. We stayed there until the evening. Before dawn they alerted us and then the assault through the Sapun ridge began. There was a terrible artillery bombardment accompanied by massive air raids. Several squadrons of planes attacked the enemy fortifications before my eyes. Everything was covered in smoke.
>
> We went into battle in the morning, moving up in a continuous chain. The bodies of those who had been killed in the first attacks were already bloating in the sun. The smell was terrible. There was blood everywhere, and the remains of human limbs. We ran into a deserted trench that had been the enemy's first defensive line. The firing was continuous and we couldn't raise our heads … We were under fire for three days. We returned fire at the enemy's machine-gun nests with our anti-tank rifles. Then there was another heavy artillery bombardment and everyone advanced, or rather climbed up. This lasted all morning. We took the second line. The Vlasovites fought hardest of all, to the last man.[34]

The 'Vlasovites' – a reference to former Soviet soldiers who were organised into a pro-German force under the command of Andrey Andreyovich Vlasov – were almost certainly *Hiwi* volunteers who were often used as drivers, cooks etc. in German units, but increasingly were given weapons and used in the front line as the war continued. Having thrown in their lot with the Germans, they knew that the Red Army would show them no mercy if they surrendered, and their desperate resistance is unsurprising.

Shramenko's training was rudimentary to say the least, but others were even less fortunate. Petr Aleksandrovich Kosakovskiy was 18 when his Crimean village was liberated, and he too was immediately drafted into the ranks:

> We were given equipment and issued with uniforms. It was all a novel experience for us, as we had no knowledge of military things. We were immediately thrown

> into the front line at Sugarloaf. I don't know how I survived. We attacked and a soldier fell near me, then Ivaskevich, a fellow villager, fell nearby. He cried out something and then was gone. And I kept walking forward and didn't get a scratch, somehow I came through alive. I was almost the only one of my platoon to reach the enemy trenches. Of my fellow villagers, almost all were either wounded or killed.[35]

After the Soviet troops captured the Sapun ridge and other nearby positions, the situation for Seventeenth Army became critical and Allmendinger scraped together his last reserves. Supported by the few remaining assault guns, these counterattacked the Sapun ridge on 8 May. Koshevoi wrote that the attacks were poorly coordinated, allowing him to concentrate fire on one after another.[36] By early afternoon, the counterattack had been abandoned and the Soviet troops began preparations for an attack of their own, scheduled for the following day. Aware that his last faint hope of holding Sevastopol had gone, Allmendinger sent a signal to Schörner to advise him that it was impossible to defend the fortress much longer. Despite his reputation as a fanatical adherent to the Führer's orders, Schörner had been sympathetic to Jaenecke's requests for permission to evacuate in the past, and passed Allmendinger's report to *OKH* with his personal endorsement. This report effectively repeated the points that Jaenecke had made less than two weeks previously. On that occasion, Hitler's response had been to sack and arrest the commander of Seventeenth Army, but late on 8 April, Allmendinger received a different reply: Hitler had bowed to the inevitable and permission was granted for an evacuation. Several thousand men had to die or be wounded before the Führer would face reality.

Ships began to take men from the harbour in Sevastopol back to Romania. Soviet artillery was now in range and bombarded the ships and quays, and Soviet aircraft attacked repeatedly. On 9 May, the Coastal Army – supported by XIX Tank Corps – attacked on the southern side of the battlefront and rapidly broke up the German defences after overwhelming the German 73rd Infantry Division as it tried to pull back to a new defensive line. Individual units quickly lost contact with their neighbours and began to disintegrate under the constant attacks. With the harbour in Sevastopol now under constant bombardment, the centre of evacuation moved to the west into the Chersonese peninsula and the Red Army advanced quickly into Sevastopol itself. By the end of the day, the 'fortress' was in Soviet hands and the Chersonese peninsula was under artillery fire. The last Luftwaffe planes – transports, bombers and fighters – left the airstrip in the peninsula that evening, taking about 1,000 wounded men with them.

The front line was now less than 1,000m in length across the narrow neck of the peninsula. Behind this, the troops of Seventeenth Army waited anxiously for evacuation. A convoy of two merchant ships and several escorts had departed from Constanta in Romania the previous day and arrived during the night. About 9,000 German and Romanian soldiers were ferried out to the ships by smaller vessels and despite Soviet air attacks at dawn on 10 May the convoy was soon heading west without sustaining any damage. Once it was in deep water, its luck ran out. An air attack sank one of the merchant ships not long after they had set off for Romania, and the other was also hit and sunk in a later attack. Although the escort ships managed to rescue several hundred men, 8,000 were lost. A second convoy lost two ships before it reached Crimea; the Romanian destroyer *Regele Ferdinand*, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Titus Samson, was hit by bombs and lost several crewmen – had all the bombs that struck the ship exploded, the losses would have been far worse. As the convoy approached the Chersonese peninsula, Soviet artillery began to fire on the ships. *Regele Ferdinand* returned fire with its five 120mm guns but continued to take damage. Almost out of ammunition, Samson turned west and limped back towards Romania, but the damage to the ship's fuel system forced the crew to set up a chain of men passing buckets of fuel oil down to the engine room. Despite their efforts, *Regele Ferdinand* came to a standstill a short distance from Constanta and had to be towed into harbour.[37]

Although the German line came under attack on 10 May, it seems as if the recapture of Sevastopol led to a brief pause in the Red Army's assaults as officers and men celebrated their great victory, including Vasilevsky:

> I very much wanted to see Sevastopol on the first day of its liberation. However, on our way over a Nazi trench in the area of the Mekenziev Hills, my car hit a mine. How on earth a mine happened to be there I shall never fathom: over the previous 48 hours literally hundreds of vehicles had travelled along that road. It really was an incredible sight: the engine and front wheels of the car had been blown several metres from the chassis, my driver had injured his left leg and I sitting beside him had received a painful head wound and splinters of glass cut my face. The three passengers behind us escaped unhurt.[38]

Time was of the essence if the remaining soldiers of Seventeenth Army were to be saved. Throughout 11 May, the defensive line beat off several Soviet attacks, including an attempt to outflank the defenders by sending troops across Striletska Bay, an inlet immediately west of Sevastopol, in small boats. That evening, the remaining German and Romanian soldiers in the defence were ordered to pull back to the beaches for the final evacuation. Some units managed to make this last withdrawal in good order, but the patrol boat carrying Konteradmiral Otto Schulz, who was coordinating the evacuation, suffered a radio breakdown. Consequently, some transport ships arrived at the wrong beaches and turned back for Romania with few or even no soldiers aboard, and other beaches were inundated with soldiers waiting in vain for rescue. Most of 98th Infantry Division's survivors were amongst the lucky ones who enjoyed an almost perfect withdrawal from contact and evacuation; most other units were able to get few, if any, of their men onto ships. The experience of the men of 50th Infantry Division was not untypical:

> Major Teschner [commander of the division's 123rd Infantry Regiment], who personally led his rearguard troops, received a report at 2200 that there were still no ferries at the loading positions on Omega Bay and that the wounded and the supply columns had been waiting there for 24 hours. He requested permission from the division to postpone the withdrawal of the rearguard … in order to obtain an additional 24 hours if it was needed. Wire and radio communications were destroyed so he dispatched an officer. Ninety minutes later, he returned with instructions to withdraw as ordered. Just then, 121st Infantry Regiment reported that they were beginning to embark so they withdrew their rearguard from their defensive positions around midnight. The neighbour on the right also withdrew at the same time. Major Teschner then ordered a withdrawal to the blocking positions, which protected the embarkation points in Kruglaya and Omega Bays from the east … Teschner personally went to clarify the situation but couldn't find any embarkation staff. He grew uneasy about the regiment's evacuation station.
>
> The only ferry that appeared could take just a few hundred men. Wounded men and supply troops engulfed it on the shore. The neighbouring division experienced the same situation. The embarkation of 121st Infantry Regiment seemed to go better, but there were only four units awaiting evacuation there.
>
> … When a ferry arrived in Omega Bay at 0200, [the soldiers] lined up in a column and boarded without rush, stopping when the ferry was full. The officers helped several wounded men onto the ferry; there was complete silence. All was calm as the officers returned from the ferry to the dock, even though it was announced that this would be the last ferry.[39]

At dawn on 12 May, the Soviet troops – led by the tanks of XIX Tank Corps – broke into the peninsula. Many Germans and Romanians were summarily executed; some German officers committed suicide; the rest were rounded up and marched away as prisoners. Isolated pockets of soldiers fought on through the day until they were overwhelmed, in particular 73rd Infantry Division, and their endurance was rewarded when German and Romanian ships returned that evening and were able to rescue a few hundred men. The destroyer *Regina Maria*, sister ship to *Regele Ferdinand*, was with the last ships – two minesweepers – and together, the three vessels rescued about 800 men who had swum out to sea from the beaches. All resistance came to an end the following morning.

The evacuation that had begun in earnest on 10 May successfully transported nearly 48,000 men from Crimea. About 8,000 were killed by Soviet air attacks on the rescue fleet, others were wounded, and an unknown number of men were taken prisoner. By comparison with losses suffered elsewhere, the Red Army paid a comparatively small price for its victory in Crimea – about 85,000 men killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Had Hitler heeded the advice of all the army and army group commanders, much or most of Seventeenth Army and its heavy equipment might have been saved. Although many troops were able to reach Romania, they were poorly armed and would take several weeks to return to front-line service. It was a heavy price to pay for Hitler's stubbornness, and the disaster led to a further deterioration in relations between Romania and Germany.

For the people of the Crimean peninsula, who had suffered so much in the preceding years at the hands of both sides, more suffering lay in wait. Even while the last battles were being fought in the Chersonese peninsula, Stalin issued a new decree:

> During the Patriotic War many Crimean Tatars betrayed the Motherland, deserting Red Army units that defended Crimea and siding with the enemy, joining volunteer army units formed by the Germans to fight against the Red Army; as members of German punitive detachments, during the occupation of Crimea by German fascist troops, the Crimean Tatars were particularly noted for their savage reprisals against Soviet partisans, and also helped the German invaders organise the violent roundup of Soviet citizens for German enslavement and the mass extermination of the Soviet people.
>
> The Crimean Tatars actively collaborated with the German occupation authorities, participating in the so-called 'Tatar National Committees', organised by the German intelligence organs, and were often used by the Germans to infiltrate the rear of the Red Army with spies and saboteurs. With the support of the Crimean Tatars, the 'Tatar National Committees', in which the leading role was played by White Guard-Tatar emigrants, directed their activity at the

> persecution and oppression of the non-Tatar population of Crimea and were engaged in preparatory efforts to separate Crimea from the Soviet Union by force, with the help of the German armed forces.
>
> Taking into account the facts cited above, the State Defence Committee decrees that:
>
> 1. All Tatars are to be banished from the territory of Crimea and resettled permanently as special settlers in the regions of the Uzbek SSR. The resettlement will be assigned to the Soviet NKVD. The Soviet NKVD (Comrade Beria) is to complete the resettlement by 1 June 1944.
>
> … By 1 June of this year, [Uzbek party officials will] accept and settle within the Uzbek SSR 140 to 160 thousand special settlers.[40]

As the Red Army's personnel began to withdraw from the Crimean peninsula – Tolbukhin's 4th Ukrainian Front was disbanded, though it would later be re-formed – the NKVD moved in with about 32,000 men. The forcible roundup of Tatars and others began on 18 May, and within three days about 150,000 people had been arrested. Thousands of Tatars serving in the Red Army were also arrested and dispatched to prison camps, even those who had spent the entire war in uniform and far from the peninsula. Over 6,000 Crimean Tatars died while travelling to Uzbekistan in crowded trains, and another 30,000 died there before the end of the Second World War. By the end of 1954, more than half the Crimean Tatars who had been deported were dead. Nor were they the only victims. Stalin intended to 'Russify' Crimea and the arrest and deportation of non-Russians followed the departure of the Tatars. The Tatars of one village on the Arabat Spit were overlooked; when they realised this, NKVD officials rounded up all the Tatars and forced them aboard a small vessel. This was towed into the Sea of Azov, where it was scuttled. Machine-gunners waited on the shore in case any of the Tatars attempted to swim to safety. The Crimean peninsula, and the ordeal of its population, encapsulates in miniature the fate of so many communities that were caught first between the Bolsheviks and the White Russians, and then between Germany and the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 10

THE END OF THE LEASH

For much of 1942 and 1943, Stalin impatiently demanded that the Western Allies open a new front against Germany. To an extent, this was similar to what had happened in the First World War; on several occasions, the Western Powers – particularly France – had requested that Russia attack the Germans in order to reduce pressure on its hard-pressed armies. In 1916, during the fighting at Verdun, this resulted in the disastrous Russian offensive at Lake Naroch, resulting in between 78,000 and 120,000 killed or wounded for no significant gain.[1] In the Second World War, the roles were largely reversed – the Soviet Union repeatedly pressed for an attack by the West in order to force Germany to divert forces from the Eastern Front.

By early 1944, Stalin had extracted a firm commitment from Churchill and Roosevelt to launch an invasion of Europe in the coming months. Whilst this was welcome news for the Soviet Union, it created its own pressures. Stalin was determined that when the war ended, his forces should be as far to the west as possible, so that he could maximise the post-war gains of the Soviet Union. In particular, there was a longstanding desire – dating back to the 19th century – for greater Russian influence over the Balkans, perhaps ultimately leading to control of Istanbul and the straits from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. It was therefore important for the Red Army to penetrate into the Balkans as soon as it could, and to gain as much ground as possible before the Western Allies mounted their invasion.

There were good operational reasons to continue attacking. Despite a widespread thaw, the Red Army had succeeded in driving the Germans – and their Romanian allies – back over the Southern Bug and Dniester, forcing them to abandon large amounts of equipment. In their weakened state, the battered

German divisions would have limited capacity to put up prolonged resistance, and even though many of the Red Army's units were equally weakened, there was surely an opportunity for one last attack into Romania. If it were successful, there was the possibility of the Romanian oilfields at Ploesti being captured, which would eliminate the main supply of non-synthetic oil to Germany and would thus hasten the end of the war. Romania would almost certainly sue for peace, perhaps triggering a wider collapse of the German position. Again, there were parallels with the First World War, when Bulgaria's separate peace with the Allied Powers opened up an irreparable breach in German defences in southern Europe. And after an unbroken series of victories, confidence was high in the Red Army at every level.

The Germans were doing all they could to shore up their shattered defences. As already described, the Germans had a poor opinion of their Romanian allies. Contempt for the Romanian Army was almost universal throughout the Wehrmacht, but the reality was that the Romanians simply lacked the modern weaponry to fight the Red Army on anything approaching equal terms and, as already mentioned, German infantry divisions also proved to have limited capacity for resistance once their anti-tank elements were overcome. The Romanians had invaded the Soviet Union alongside the Germans in the hope of benefiting in terms of territory and other spoils of war, and by this stage of the war there was no enthusiasm whatever for continuing the struggle. The attitude of the Germans – repeated failures to provide equipment that had been promised, and refusal to pay for food and oil that was requisitioned for German use – did nothing to encourage their allies to remain loyal. Some within Romania were already looking for a way out of a conflict that looked increasingly disastrous for them, and were not inclined to continue fighting purely for the benefit of Germany. In addition to their infantry and cavalry units, the Romanians deployed several companies of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division to defend against Konev's armies. The original division lost most of its equipment during the Red Army's encirclement of Stalingrad and had been slowly rebuilt, and now had a total strength of about 48 Pz.IVs, 22 assault guns, and ten Tacam T-60 tank destroyers – former Soviet 76mm guns mounted on captured T-60 chassis. Throughout 1944, the division rarely, if ever, functioned as a coherent whole, and its units were assigned to support other Romanian divisions.

In the First World War, the German Army on the Eastern Front constantly had to intervene in sectors held by its Austro-Hungarian ally to prevent complete collapse, and as the war continued there was a deliberate policy of inserting German units into Austro-Hungarian formations to try to make them more robust; there were also attempts to ensure a German presence in the command chain of Austro-Hungarian units. In an attempt to avoid the disaster of late 1942 when the Red Army exploited the weakness of Romanian forces to encircle Stalingrad, the Germans used their First World War experience and imposed a complex command system to try to integrate Romanian units alongside German formations. The Romanian Third Army was effectively subordinated to the German Sixth Army, and the Romanian Fourth Army came under the control of the German Eighth Army. In late March, Wöhler had a meeting with Lieutenant General Mihail Racoviță, commander of the Romanian Fourth Army; he returned to his headquarters believing that the Romanians had very little will to fight, even in defence of their homeland.[2]

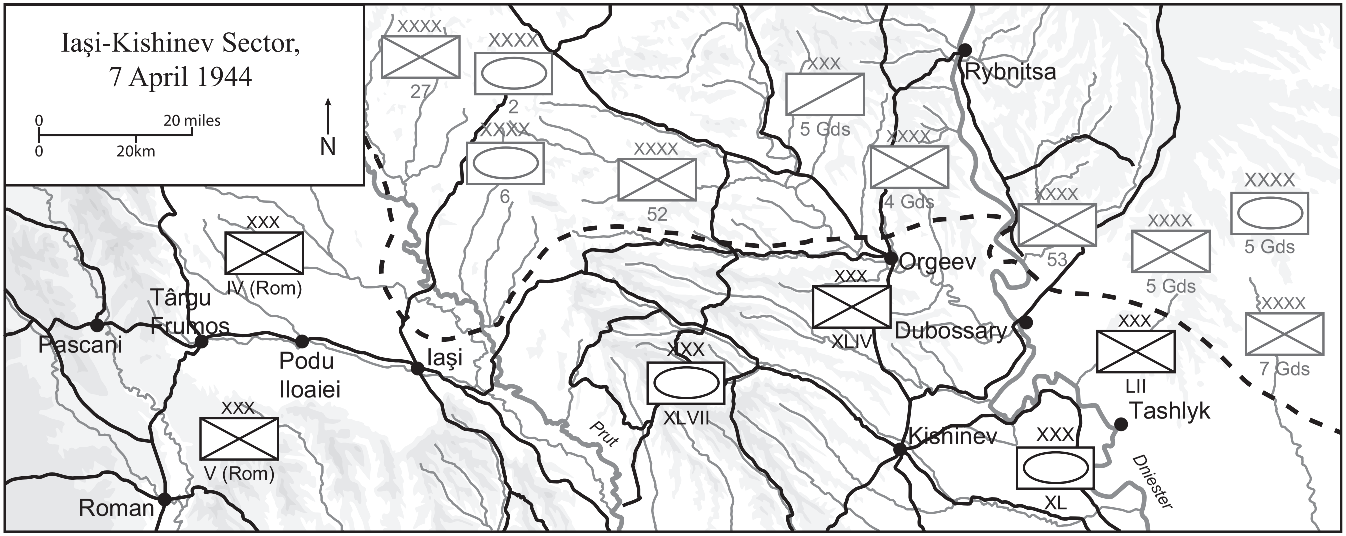
However, regardless of the accuracy or otherwise of these observations, both German commands had little choice other than to rely on the Romanians. The advance by Pliev's Horse and Mechanised Group to Razdelnaya had effectively broken Sixth Army into two pieces. The northern half – LII and III Corps – succeeded in pulling back to the Dniester in comparatively good order, but the rest was left to fight its way past Pliev's tanks and cavalry and escape towards the west, inevitably losing much of its heavy equipment in the process. It would take time for these units to reorganise and receive replacement equipment, but in the meantime, the Romanians were deployed in the front line. As German units arrived – and where possible were re-equipped and given replacement drafts – they were then dispatched to replace Romanian units. Despite this, the Soviet assault into Romania would fall on a mixture of German and Romanian defenders. Unlike previous battles, when the Germans had been forced to fight in relatively unprepared positions, they and their Romanian allies would on this occasion be able to take advantage of the Strunga Defence Line, a series of fortifications that ran for about 48 miles (80km) in the valley of the Siret River – it should be noted that this Siret is a different waterway from the river north of the Dniester that crossed the path taken by First Panzer Army to safety. However, there were differences of opinion between the Germans and the Romanians about the Strunga Line. The defences had been constructed to defend Romania against a Soviet attack, and did not fully protect the road that ran west from the city of Iaşi, running instead through favourable high ground somewhat to the south. To the Germans, defence of this road was critical, as it ensured continuity of their front line with positions to the west and northwest. Regardless of Axis disagreements, the Red Army was aware of these defences, and consequently placed great importance on overrunning them before they could be manned properly.

The terrain over which the campaign would be fought was dominated by the cities of Kishinev and Iaşi. The latter was the location of important road and rail crossings over the Prut River, and from there one of the few major east-west roads ran to the town of Târgu Frumos and thereafter to the Carpathian Mountains. An officer of 24th Panzer Division later described the region:

> The hilly landscape, with valleys and hollows and partly dominated by areas of high ground, gave equal opportunities for both defence and attack. The defender could occupy a line of natural obstacles on the high ground, particularly for anti-tank defence, whereas the attacker would find preparation areas and lines of approach in the hollows.
>
> The road conditions were better than in Russia, with at least a few metalled main roads that remained usable in all weather. But here too the unmetalled routes were rendered impassable after light rain, though they dried rapidly due to the lighter soil.[3]

This sector provided the Red Army with a final opportunity to drive the German and Romanian forces to the south rather than permitting their retreat to the Carpathians. To an extent, success or failure in this last Soviet operation before a lengthy pause would depend on which side could gather its far-flung forces and concentrate sufficient depleted formations in this critical area. The Axis powers benefited from having been driven back closer to their rear areas, whereas the Red Army was operating at the end of long, tenuous supply lines; but the Wehrmacht units were beaten and had lost much of their heavy equipment, whereas the Soviet formations, despite their losses, remained full of confidence as a result of their victories.

As they pursued the Axis forces, Soviet units began to encounter increasing German resistance around the city of Iaşi. In an attempt to outflank this, *Stavka* sent instructions to Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front on 5 April to try to turn the western flank of these defences. Konev responded by submitting plans for a sustained advance with his western flank; while Fortieth Army then turned west to safeguard the right wing of 2nd Ukrainian Front, Twenty-Seventh Army – reinforced as the operation unfolded by III Guards Tank Corps, Seventh Guards Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army – was to push south. At the same time, the eastern flank of 2nd Ukrainian Front would attempt to attack towards Kishinev. With a total of seven combined-arms armies and three tank armies, together with two mechanised corps, III Guards Tank Corps and V Guards Cavalry Corps, he was confident that he had



Iaşi-Kishinev Sector, 7 April 1944

0
20 miles
0
20km
N
XXXX
27
XXXX
2
XXXX
6
XXXX
52
XXX
5 Gds
XXXX
4 Gds
XXXX
53
XXXX
5 Gds
XXXX
5 Gds
XXXX
7 Gds
XXX
LII
XXX
XL
XXX
XLIV
XXX
XLVII
XXX
IV (Rom)
XXX
V (Rom)
Rybnitsa
Orgeev
Dubossary
Tashlyk
Kishinev
Dniester
Prut
Iaşi
Podu Iloaiei
Târgu Frumos
Pascani
Roman

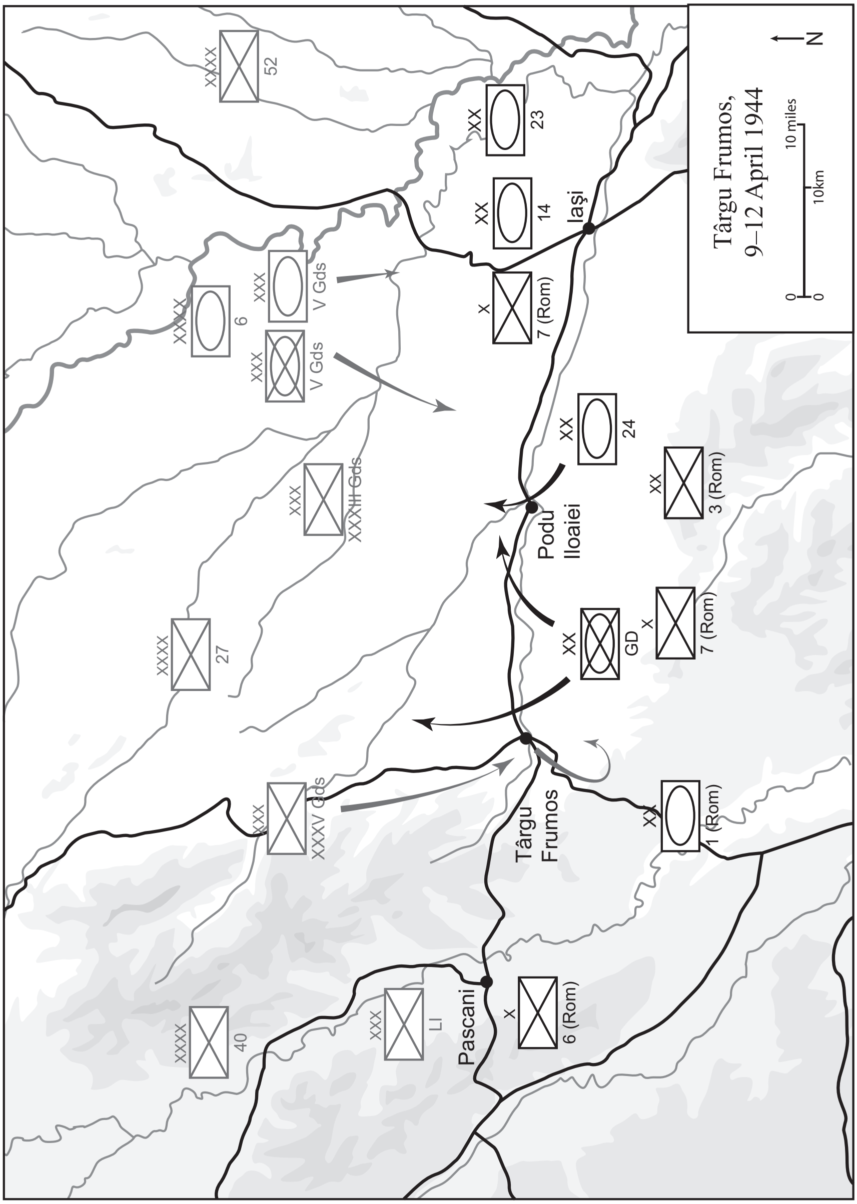
sufficient strength to achieve his objectives. *Stavka* expressed doubts about this plan, largely because it seemed unlikely that Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army had sufficient strength to be able to help sustain the operation, and in any case was most unlikely to reach the designated sector in time. Instead, Konev was ordered to transfer one of his other two tank armies to the west bank of the Prut in order to support the offensive. At the same time that Konev carried out this thrust, 3rd Ukrainian Front would advance from the east into the region to the south of Kishinev. Malinovsky had no tank armies available to him, but the Horse and Mechanised Group remained at his disposal and despite the fatigue of its men and horses, it remained a potent mobile force, alongside six combined-arms armies, and given the defeats inflicted upon the German Eighth and Sixth Armies, this was surely sufficient to break the brittle German and Romanian defences. With two of Konev's (admittedly depleted) tank armies attacking towards Kishinev from the north and the other supporting the attack to the west of Iaşi, there was the prospect of threatening any prolonged German defence of the Iaşi-Kishinev sector with encirclement. Moreover, the Germans were accustomed to the Red Army pausing its operations during the spring thaw. Continuing attacks through the season would put additional pressure upon the exhausted, weakened Wehrmacht units.

It should be stressed that *Stavka* anticipated that the campaign would largely be carried out by Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front – it was regarded as strong enough to accomplish most of what was required, with Malinovsky's 3rd Ukrainian Front providing support by mounting secondary attacks to tie down German formations further east. Stalin and other senior figures were aware that at least two of Malinovsky's armies were still busy clearing Odessa and the surrounding region, and would therefore not be immediately available for an attack into Romania. These assumptions were further complicated by another factor. As the German divisions pulled back to and over the Dniester, they were often removed from the front line. As a result, the Red Army began to lose track of which German divisions had been destroyed, and which were still intact and now recovering their strength. The impressive increased production of German war industry was also not taken into account – whilst the material losses of the Wehrmacht east of the Dniester had been considerable, most of its troops had escaped capture, and once they received replacement equipment, they were rapidly put back into the front line.

As has already been described, all three tank armies in 2nd Ukrainian Front were badly weakened; as it began to pull out of line and headed for the Prut

River crossings, Sixth Tank Army could field no more than 30 tanks and assault guns.[4] Whilst his plans for the coming offensive envisaged outflanking the German and Romanian defences from the west, Konev ordered Kravchenko to deploy his tank army in support of Fifty-Second Army, north of Târgu Frumos, where it was to support an attack towards the town in order to tie down German forces in the area. At the same time, Second Tank Army was to attack towards the town of Podu Iloaiei. With the Germans still pulling their troops back from the east, these attacks would, it was hoped, take place before they could complete its redeployment. When it began on 7 April, 2nd Ukrainian Front's attack made good progress at first, driving back the relatively thin screen of Romanian forward positions and advancing rapidly towards Târgu Frumos. The Strunga Line defences ran to the south of the town and the Romanian IV Corps hurried to deploy in these positions before they were overrun; to the west of the town, the Soviet advance soon came to a halt in the face of determined Romanian defence, but on 9 April XXXV Guards Rifle Corps, the leading formation of Trofimenko's Twenty-Seventh Army, took Târgu Frumos and drove the Romanians off to the south. The Germans saw this as evidence of the weakness of the Romanians, but the Romanians were merely falling back to their prepared positions in the Strunga Line.

Aware of the threat to his western flank, Wöhler had already ordered reinforcements to the area. The hopes of the men of 24th Panzer Division that they would finally be able to enjoy a prolonged break from combat while they and the division recovered proved short-lived; they were ordered to Podu Iloaiei from where it was hoped they would be able to attack into the eastern flank of Konev's advance. Despite pulling out of Ukraine with no operational tanks, 24th Panzer Division now had about a dozen tanks and assault guns available, mainly vehicles that had been patched up by the workshop teams, and these immediately found themselves drawn into combat with Soviet armour from Second Tank Army. A series of clashes took place over the next few days; the Soviet attack towards Podu Iloaiei was brought to a halt, but there was no prospect of 24th Panzer Division being able to intervene further west. However, Wöhler had other forces available. After being sent west by train, through a combination of new equipment and repaired vehicles, *Grossdeutschland* had recovered to field 40 Panther tanks and 40 Tiger tanks in addition to a number of assault guns and was on its way to Târgu Frumos. The leading elements of the division arrived on 9 April, even as the Soviet XXXV Guards Rifle Corps began to move towards the south of the town, and secured a small lodgement in the southeast part of Târgu Frumos.



Târgu Frumos, 9–12 April 1944

N
0 10 miles
0 10km
Iaşi
Podu Iloaiei
Târgu Frumos
Pascani
XXXX 52
XXXX 6
XXXX 27
XXXX 40
XXX V Gds
XXX XXXIII Gds
XXX XXXV Gds
XXX LI
XX 23
XX 14
XX 24
XX GD
XX 3 (Rom)
XX 1 (Rom)
X 7 (Rom)
X 6 (Rom)

The following day, a battalion of infantry from *Grossdeutschland*, supported by a number of tanks, helped restore the German line near Podu Iloaiei. At the same time, other elements of the division moved rapidly to reinforce the units that had entered Târgu Frumos and rapidly overran the town – XXXV Guards Rifle Corps had left its rear area units to hold the town until further Soviet troops arrived and had sent its three divisions on towards the south. These were now hastily extracted, some suffering casualties as they fought their way past *Grossdeutschland*. At the same time, Romanian troops counterattacked from the south and west, completing the elimination of the salient that the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army had created. For the moment at least, Konev's planned envelopment of the German Eighth Army from the west had been thwarted.

Heavy fighting continued throughout the region for the next few days, particularly around Podu Iloaiei, where the Red Army repeatedly made attempts to eliminate the salient held by 24th Panzer Division. The veteran panzergrenadiers of the German division concentrated their fire on the Soviet infantry and drove them to ground, allowing the Soviet tanks to roll through and past their positions; an armoured battlegroup, with the division's few tanks, then counterattacked into the flank of the Soviet tanks and eliminated them.[5] Despite his growing frustration, Konev was forced to call a halt to operations on his western flank until all of his forces – particularly Seventh Guards Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army – were available as reinforcements. As the fighting died down, 24th Panzer Division was pulled out of the front line and held in reserve.

At the same time as these battles for Podu Iloaiei and Târgu Frumos, the central and eastern armies of 2nd Ukrainian Front continued to apply pressure on the German line. Lieutenant General Ivan Vasileevich Galanin's Fourth Guards Army had crossed the Dniester at Rybnitsa at the end of March and was ordered to advance on Kishinev. The roads of Romania might have been coping with the weather rather better than those of Ukraine, but this region – known at various times as Bessarabia or Transnistria, and now part of the nation of Moldova – was comparatively undeveloped and had few hard roads. As was frequently the case, the Red Army struggled to bring forward its artillery with its advancing troops:

> Aware of the great importance of the Kishinev axis, the Fascist German command deployed their strongest and most effective units there – 11th, 14th, and 13th Panzer Divisions and 282nd Infantry Division. It was increasingly difficult to overcome strengthening enemy resistance because our forces had insufficient artillery and ammunition. No more than 200 of the army's 700 guns were in their firing positions. The remainder lagged to the rear. They were stranded in sticky

> mud and were unable to reach their formations and support them with artillery fire. It was equally difficult to supply ammunition to the artillery and mortar positions. We used every possible mode of transport, including carrying the shells forward by hand. Despite these measures, the gunners had inadequate ammunition to carry out their orders.[6]

The 'strengthening enemy resistance' was the result of the German forces pulling back across the Dniester into a shorter front line. During the first week of April, a combination of terrain difficulties and tough German defences – in addition to the divisions listed in the account above, the German 3rd Panzer Division was also present – brought Fourth Guards Army to a halt. After a pause for troops to be brought forward and for at least some of his artillery to take up positions, Galanin tried again, and once more was brought to a halt in difficult terrain. Nevertheless, having lost all but six of its tanks and after suffering over 900 casualties, 3rd Panzer Division was forced to pull back to a shorter defensive line, allowing Fourth Guards Army to occupy Orgeev.[7] By this stage, Galanin's divisions were down to about 50 per cent of their establishment strength.

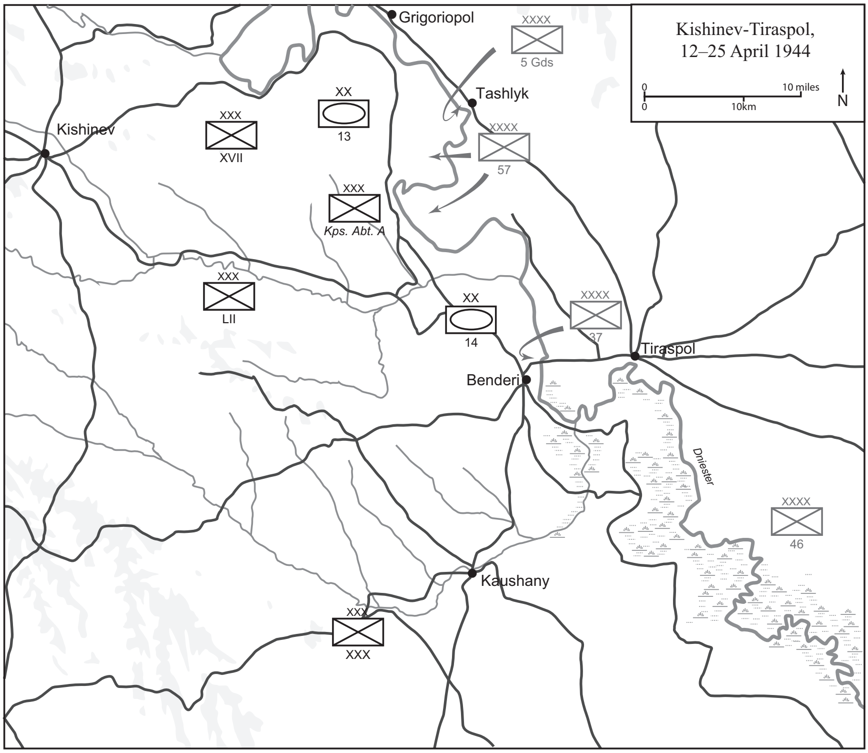
Further to the southeast, Fifth Guards Army also experienced considerable difficulties as it approached the Dniester, having been held up at Pervomaisk. Zhadov later wrote:

> I want to note that Konev issued orders to us to force the Dniester at 11pm on 1 April 1944, when our formations were still 65km [39 miles] from the river. The task was described very succinctly: rapidly pursuing the enemy towards Grigoriopol, we were to force the Dniester by 5 April and advance towards Kampernitsa, Budesti, and Speya …
>
> Before us was the Dniester, flowing fast and wide.
>
> Our scouts informed us that in front of our army was *Korps Abteilung A* under Generalleutnant [Paul] Dreckmann, defending with up to ten infantry regiments and four independent battalions, 22 artillery batteries, seven mortar batteries, more than 60 field guns, 34 anti-tank guns, 40 mortars, 300 machine-guns, 15 tanks, and 4,100 other combatants. The Nazis had fortified the west bank of the river. Fifth Guards Army suffered serious losses during the offensive, and artillery and transport units lagged behind. There was an acute shortage of ammunition … In addition, as I was informed by the officers of the headquarters of the engineering troops, there were only 12 A3 inflatable boats in the army, and two ferries, and even one of those needed repairs. By the most conservative estimates, it would take 10–15 days to cross the river with these resources. And I had

> nothing at all with which to transport tanks. What could we do? Build wooden bridges? But where could we get the timber? There were only fruit trees nearby.
>
> There was only one way – to force the Dniester using the means at hand, literally everything that wouldn't sink. In addition, we decided to give one ferry and an amphibious vehicle from those available to the leading divisions, and to use the inflatable boats. However, another bridge with a capacity of 12 tons and a ferry for tanks were also needed, because after the crossing the army needed to be supplied with everything necessary for combat. In order to make a floating bridge, the sappers used flooring, rafters, logs, doors, window frames, and shutters from wrecked houses.[8]

As the Germans retreated, they combined the remnants of infantry divisions and ad hoc rear area units to create formations like *Korps Abteilung A*. Drekmann's command consisted of troops from 161st, 293rd and 355th Infantry Divisions, reinforced by small artillery and anti-tank units. In August 1943, the commander of 161st Infantry Division, Generalleutnant Heinrich Recke, was killed in action and was replaced temporarily by Oberst Otto Schell, commander of one of the division's regiments, then a few days later by Generalleutnant Karl Albrecht von Groddeck. Six days later, Groddeck was severely wounded (he subsequently died as a result of these wounds) and replaced by Dreckmann, who thus became the fourth commander of the division in just a few days. In October 1943, what remained of his division was used as the core of *Korps Abteilung A*, taking over the remnants of two other badly weakened divisions. The total strength of *Korps Abteilung A* amounted to less than a single full-strength infantry division, and even given the weaknesses of Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army and its logistic difficulties, the balance of power was greatly in favour of the Soviet troops.

Zhadov began crossing the Dniester late on 12 April. One of the two attempts succeeded in establishing a small bridgehead and Zhadov promptly switched all of his efforts to reinforcing this sector. By 16 April, he had succeeded in moving significant infantry forces across the river, but it had not been possible to transfer a single tank to the west bank. To the south of Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army was Fifty-Seventh Army, the northern flank of 3rd Ukrainian Front, and Zhadov was able to borrow bridging material from his neighbour to construct a tank ferry; however, even as the sappers began to operate the ferry, they were caught by a surprising fall in the level of the river, resulting in the ferry being stranded some distance from the shore. Piers were then laboriously constructed on each bank to allow the ferry to continue to function. Attempts to expand the bridgehead resulted in bitter fighting with losses on both sides, but Zhadov was unable to



Kishinev-Tiraspol,
12–25 April 1944

0
10 miles
0
10km
N
Grigoriopol
XXXX
5 Gds
Tashlyk
XX
13
XXX
XVII
Kishinev
XXXX
57
XXX
Kps. Abt. A
XXX
LII
XX
14
XXXX
37
Tiraspol
Benderi
Dniester
XXXX
46
Kaushany
XXX
XXX

break out towards Kishinev. Finally, he was ordered to withdraw his army across the river and hand over the bridgehead to Malinovsky's 3rd Ukrainian Front; Fifth Guards Army was pulled into reserve. To Zhadov's chagrin, the bridgehead did not survive for long:

> A few days after our departure from the bridgehead, the Fascist German command launched a powerful blow against the troops that replaced us [Eighth Guards Army]. The outcome was a disappointment for us: our men had to abandon the bridgehead. I write about this not to disparage those who replaced us. In war, anything can happen, and units with long combat experience can suffer defeats, as was the case here. I remember this episode particularly because the abandonment of any shred of Soviet territory, which had been liberated from the enemy with such difficulty, especially a bridgehead where the struggle had been particularly bloody, was felt by everyone, from soldiers to the supreme commander. And

> although we were far from where these tragic events played out so unexpectedly, we nonetheless assumed the reasons were an underestimation of the forces and capabilities of the enemy grouping of five divisions that had tried to drive us out of the bridgehead. We had survived because we studied their activity carefully, creating a well-organised system of defensive fire, above all with artillery, mortars and anti-tank guns, and after our departure this system was seemingly abandoned.[9]

In addition to helping Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army, Fifty-Seventh Army attempted to secure its own bridgehead. The Dniester in this sector formed a loop towards the west and after reaching the river on 12 April, the leading elements of Lieutenant General Nikolai Aleksandrovich Gagen's army secured a bridgehead at the northern end of the river loop. Attempts to clear all of the ground to the east of the river within the loop continued for several days with mixed results, and further small bridgeheads were secured to the south, but it proved impossible to coalesce these into a single large foothold on the west bank, not least because the area was overlooked by high ground further west where the Germans had prepared their defences. After several days of hard fighting, Gagen had to call a halt until reinforcements could be brought forward. To his south, Thirty-Seventh Army took Tiraspol on 11 April but was also halted by German defences on high ground to the west. Any hope of significant gains disappeared as the weather turned wet with almost incessant rain, and the brief fall in the river level that had confounded Zhadov was rapidly reversed. At the southern end of the battlefield, Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army had finally begun to move forward after clearing Odessa and found conditions almost impossible:

> The water began to rise in the Dniester estuary. The wind blew constantly. The rising water in Tsaregradski disrupted the crossing by 79th Guards Rifle Division.
>
> Then the water began to reach the bridgehead we had captured west of Belyaevka and Mayakov. On 18 April the Dniester began to burst its bank in places. On 20 April, the water flooded the trenches of the units of 35th Guards Rifle Division that had been preparing to attack. Every day the army headquarters received messages from other units that the water was continuing to rise.
>
> On the night of 25 April, just before the start of the planned attack, the wind picked up. Water poured into the artillery positions. We tried to carry out the front commander's order and launch an offensive. But where? Our artillery was almost silent; the infantry couldn't advance through water that was up to their knees. The islands [in the river] were submerged. The soldiers gathered in a few small locations, climbing into the trees and clinging there like crows.

> My observation post was located on high ground southeast of Palanca. Water even reached this area. At first the ground just became squelchy, then everything was awash.
>
> I contacted the front commander by phone and reported on the situation. Initially, Malinovsky didn't believe that the rise in water level was so serious. On the phone, it was of course difficult to determine what was happening on the riverbank. I categorically stated that if the water didn't stop rising, then we would be without artillery altogether within a day, and that the men were roosting in trees.
>
> Fortunately for us, the front's pontoon battalion arrived at Mayakov. We used it to lift men out of the bridgehead. On 27 April, the entire bridgehead was abandoned without a fight.[10]

The flooding in the lower Dniester valley effectively brought operations to a halt for several days. Whilst Konev continued to concentrate his forces out to the west, Malinovsky received new orders. In conjunction with the neighbouring Fifth Guards Army, his northern forces – Fifty-Seventh, and Thirty-Seventh – were to combine their bridgeheads and advance west to reach the old frontier with Romania. Having completed their operations in and around Odessa, Sixth Army and Fifth Shock Army would be inserted to the south of Thirty-Seventh Army, while Forty-Sixth and Eight Guards Armies covered the southern flank of this main thrust. Supplies remained short, especially in artillery ammunition, with the result that the initial bombardment would be far weaker than had been the case in almost any major Soviet attack since the end of 1942. Even if artillery ammunition had been plentiful, an attack on this scale, intended to advance to and perhaps beyond the Prut, would have been a formidable task for formations that were so far from full strength; in the prevailing circumstances, the orders were unrealistic.

On the west bank of the lower Dniester, the German Sixth Army was recovering from its recent retreat. From north to south, it consisted of XVII Corps, LII Corps (with 13th Panzer Division deployed close behind), XXX Corps (with 14th Panzer Division in support), XXIX Corps, and XLIV Corps (with the Romanian III Corps in support). Critically, the two panzer divisions were ideally positioned to intercept the planned Soviet attack. Malinovsky's forces enjoyed a substantial numerical advantage – perhaps 3:1 in infantry, 5:1 in tanks and 10:1 in artillery – but the numerous small bridgeheads prevented 3rd Ukrainian Front from concentrating a decisive force in one location and ammunition shortages largely negated the artillery advantage. With the German infantry dug in on dominating high ground, the prospects of success for Malinovsky were not good.

Partly in keeping with Red Army practice of having a phased start date for attacks, and partly due to further delays caused by supply problems, 3rd Ukrainian Front's armies attacked on different days. In the past, this policy had often tied down German reserves at one location, only for fighting then to erupt elsewhere, but it proved almost impossible for the Soviet troops to sustain their operations. The first attacks came on 17 April when Fifty-Seventh Army tried in vain to break out of its bridgehead. Further attempts over the following days, some supported by Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army, were all successfully fended off by *Korps Abteilung A*. To the south, Thirty-Seventh Army delayed the start date of its attack until 20 April to allow more artillery ammunition to be brought forward but also failed to make much progress. The limited gains were then eliminated by a determined counterattack by 14th Panzer Division. The Soviet Sixth Army joined the offensive on 25 April, but its attack was hamstrung by artillery ammunition shortages and resulted in little or no gain, at a heavy cost in terms of infantry casualties. Further attacks by Forty-Sixth and Fifth Shock Armies also foundered rapidly.

Konev had planned to launch his own assault in late April on the assumption that, even if his armies were making little progress, Malinovsky would at least have tied down significant German forces. As the attacks across the lower Dniester petered out, Konev was forced to re-evaulate and postponed his renewed offensive until 2 May to allow more reinforcements and supplies to be brought forward. Nevertheless, he remained confident that he would be able to succeed. There were reasons for optimism. The arrival of Seventh Guards Army and Twenty-Seventh Army meant that the assault would be made with perhaps twice the strength deployed in the previous attempt – even if the Germans had also strengthened their positions, this was surely enough to inflict a serious defeat on the Wehrmacht. The Germans had already shown how rapidly their depleted units could be restored to usable strength, and it was now the turn of the Red Army; just a few weeks before, Rotmistrov's army had perhaps only 20 tanks available, but it now fielded 271 tanks and 87 assault guns. These included 40 of the new IS-2 tanks, and this influx of vehicles had brought it nearly to 50 per cent of its establishment strength.[11] Alongside Seventh Guards Army was Trofimenko's Twenty-Seventh Army, with Second Tank Army in support. Like Rotmistrov, Bogdanov had received substantial reinforcements, raising the strength of his tank army to 121 tanks and assault guns, but his army remained significantly below 50 per cent of its establishment. Once these forces – collectively described as the front's 'shock group' – had broken through the Axis defences and turned their western flank, Konev's units north of Iaşi were to resume their attacks while 3rd Ukrainian Front attempted once more to reach and capture Kishinev.

Facing this planned assault was Wöhler's group, with the Romanian Fourth Army and the German Eighth Army. From west to east, these consisted of the Romanian I and V Corps, and *Grossdeutschland* (from LVII Panzer Corps) in support. In addition, LVII Panzer Corps had a regiment from 46th Infantry Division and *SS-Totenkopf* held back as operational reserves, with 24th Panzer Division further forward to provide tactical support either on the Târgu Frumos or Iaşi sectors. The German IV Corps was responsible for defending Iaşi and the surrounding area.

The terrain over which the battle would be fought was largely the same as in the previous attempt by the Red Army to outflank the Axis defences. Manteuffel, who became commander of *Grossdeutschland* in February, later described how, based upon the previous attack and on his personal assessment, the likely direction of a new Soviet attack was anticipated and steps taken to hinder it. Any Soviet advance towards Ploesti would have to come through Târgu Frumos:

> As I saw it, the possession of Târgu Frumos closed this gateway to the south, since from Târgu Frumos one controlled the only practicable road to the east of the Siret River ... The divisional battle headquarders was in the town ... at the western exit. From there I could overlook and supervise the employment of the division, both orally and visually, and had, in addition, a good network of roads and of rapid communication with my commanders. The place had been badly destroyed in the fighting and it was, therefore, probably supposed that I would not be there. I was seldom disturbed by gunfire when working, eating, or playing bridge.
>
> During April what I had foreseen when taking Târgu Frumos became more apparent from aerial photography, and from radio interception and scout reconnaissance, namely that the Soviets would have to come this way if they wished to thrust forward to Ploesti. I therefore asked for a postponement of my visit to the Führer's headquarters, where Adolf Hitler had summoned me in the middle of April, because I regarded the attack as imminent and did not wish to leave my troops. My request was granted and I was able to occupy myself intensively with defensive preparations.
>
> During those weeks the division clawed itself firmly into the ground in the most literal sense of the words. All the troops vied with one another in preparing a suitable reception for the enemy ...
>
> ... The terrain [to the north] was everywhere practicable and passable for tanks, with long fields of fire. The fact that the enemy was occupying the

> dominating heights north of this line was unfavourable, but it was at a distance of approximately five or six miles from our foremost covering forces, so that, I hoped, he could only see the outline of our defensive system and not discover its finer points. We advanced our foremost covering forces to approximately 2,700m north of Târgu Frumos … Rising terrain [immediately south and southwest of Târgu Frumos] afforded us excellent observation posts and positions for anti-aircraft and artillery. There was also a Soviet field position in front of the deep and broad wooded terrain [on the left flank] in which the Romanians, who were very frightened, were digging trenches off and on. The natural vegetation in the entire sector of the division afforded us camouflage for the infantry positions, their heavy weapons, and for the assault guns.[12]

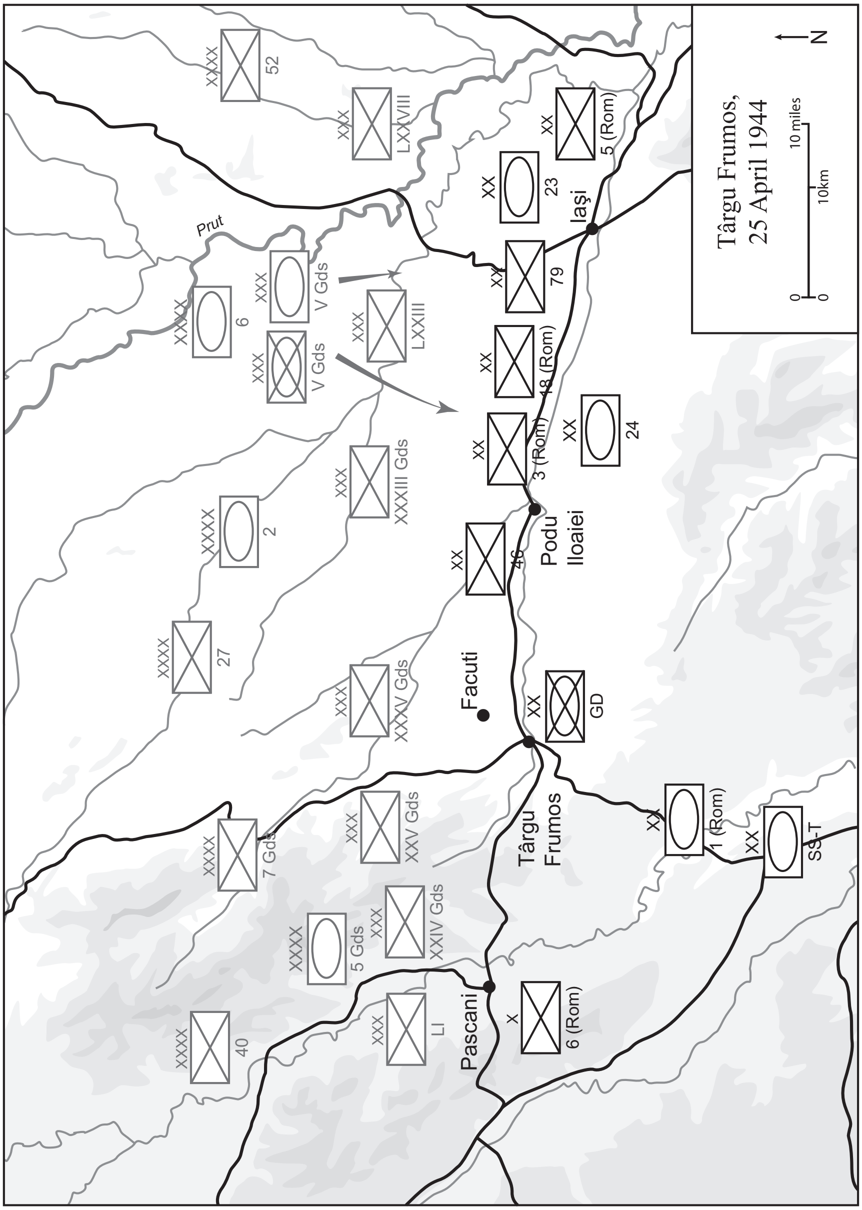
Like most Germans, Manteuffel had a low opinion of the willingness of the Romanians to stand and fight:

> The fighting value of the Romanians was low, and weighed nothing in the balance; they were a burden to us. The officer corps was poor. This judgment applies to all the troops employed in the Romanian boundary position, that is, left of and behind our positions, and the cavalry division held back behind the divisional sector which I had to supply. I counted on none of these formations – and turned out to be only too right![13]

Manteuffel's plan for defending his positions was a modification of standard German panzer division doctrine. The two panzergrenadier regiments of the division – in *Grossdeutschland*, these were named the Panzer Fusilier Regiment and the Panzer Grenadier Regiment – were deployed in the front line in well-prepared positions, with a reconnaissance screen in front of them. In normal circumstances, this forward line of infantry would have been provided by infantry divisions, allowing the panzer division to concentrate all of its resources in readiness for counterattacks, but in the absence of adequate infantry – particularly troops that could be relied upon to stop armoured attacks – Manteuffel had no choice but to use his panzergrenadiers. The division's panzer regiment, now fielding an impressive 160 tanks, was held in reserve and would be used to mount sharp counterattacks against Soviet forces, particularly against tanks, if they penetrated the infantry defences. The role of the panzergrenadiers was to try to separate Soviet infantry from their armour, and Manteuffel made clear to his men that they might have to continue fighting even after Soviet troops had passed through their lines – he intended to try to avoid splitting up his armour, which might mean that infantry in one sector would have to wait until the panzer regiment had dealt with penetrations elsewhere. Like the panzer divisions of the *Waffen-SS*, *Grossdeutschland* had a battalion of assault guns, and these were assigned to the panzergrenadier regiments to give them valuable anti-tank firepower. *Grossdeutschland* had spent much of the preceding year moving from one crisis to another, engaging the Red Army in encounter battles that often became chaotic, and on this occasion the division made the most of the time that it had for preparing its positions. Fields of fire for all weapons were carefully set out, and the panzer regiment rehearsed how it would deal with Soviet penetrations at different points of the front line.

Manteuffel wrote that he was sure that his division's sector would soon feel the weight of Konev's assault, but others were more concerned about the Iaşi sector. This was defended by the Romanian IV Corps, and local diversionary attacks encouraged the belief of local German commanders that their sector would soon come under greater attack. The first Soviet attack, little more than a reconnaissance in force, took place on 24 April, followed by a larger attack the following day by XXX Rifle Corps supported by a tank brigade from Second Tank Army's III Tank Corps. On 26 April, there was a third attack by two rifle corps from Fifty-Second Army, supported by perhaps two battalions of tanks from Sixth Tank Army. The second attack succeeded in penetrating up to a mile into the defences of the Romanian 18th Infantry Division, but a counterattack led by a panzergrenadier regiment from 24th Panzer Division restored the front line. The third attack was rather more successful, falling on the defences of the Romanian 5th Infantry Division, which was largely routed. A counterattack by 23rd Panzer Division and 79th Infantry Division, supported by the panzergrenadier regiment from 24th Panzer Division that had led the earlier counterattack, eliminated most of the Soviet gains, but the clear presence of elements of two Soviet tank armies persuaded General Friedrich Mieth, the German commander of IV Corps, that further assaults in his sector were imminent. A series of German spoiling attacks took place in the last days of April, both at Iaşi and to the west near Târgu Frumos. These achieved little other than contributing to a further short delay in Konev's planned attack.

The Soviet artillery preparation began at 0515 on 2 May. An hour later, several salvoes of *Katyusha* rockets were followed by the first ground attacks. The most western element of 2nd Ukrainian Front, Seventh Guards Army, overran the defensive positions manned by infantry elements of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division and pushed forward rapidly about five miles. A little to the east, the Soviet troops made similar gains, leaving a number of Romanian and



Târgu Frumos,
25 April 1944

N
0 10 miles
0 10km
XXXX 52
XXX LXXVIII
XX 5 (Rom)
XX 23
Iași
Prut
XXX V Gds
XXXX 6
XX 79
XXX LXXIII
XXX V Gds
XX 18 (Rom)
XX 24
XX 3 (Rom)
XXXX 2
XXX XXXIII Gds
Podu Iloaiei
XX 46
XXXX 27
XXX XXXV Gds
Facuti
XX GD
Târgu Frumos
XX 1 (Rom)
XX SS-T
XXXX 7 Gds
XXX XXV Gds
XXX XXIV Gds
XXXX 5 Gds
XXXX 40
XXX LI
Pascani
X 6 (Rom)

German strongpoints isolated to their rear, but were brought to an abrupt halt when they ran into a battlegroup from *SS-Totenkopf* that had been dispatched to shore up the defences. Taking advantage of this thrust to the south, XXIX Tank Corps – part of Rotmistrov's Fifth Guards Tank Army – advanced on Târgu Frumos from the northwest. Manteuffel later described the fighting:

> I saw from my battle headquarters the Soviet tanks rolling up to the town. Our own infantry had allowed them to roll past – partly in order to leave the prize to the anti-aircraft battery of 88mm guns dug in at the northern exit of Târgu Frumos. Most of the attacking tanks, of which there were about 25, were shot up in flames; the remainder, about 10, broke into the concentration area of our panzer regiment and were destroyed.[14]

Manteuffel ordered his panzer regiment to move to the area west of Târgu Frumos and proceeded himself towards the lines of the *Grossdeutschland* Panzer Grenadier Regiment, which was defending that area. Here, he came across a group of the division's assault guns, positioned behind the infantry lines. A group of Soviet tanks that had passed through the foremost German lines was permitted to approach to within 30m before the assault guns opened fire, rapidly destroying all the attacking tanks. A second column of Soviet armour was spotted a little to the west and crushed by the fire of the panzer regiment.

It was still only mid-morning, and despite their successes, the German tank crews had a sudden and unpleasant surprise:

> As I was speaking to the commander of the panzer regiment in his command vehicle (by radio), we heard tank fire of the heaviest calibre from a great distance go past between our vehicles. We soon ascertained that it was being delivered from a distance of about 3,000m by heavy tanks which were firing from a stationary position there.
>
> At first we thought a company of our own Tiger tanks had lost its way because we had not previously met heavy tanks of this type on the Soviet side. One company of Tiger tanks was ordered to come up, and these began to fire on the [enemy] tanks. One could clearly see the shell hitting these tanks, but they ricocheted off the armour plating.
>
> The commander of the Tiger battalion who was present ordered the tanks to attack, drove up within approximately [2,000m] of the enemy tanks, and opened fire on them. Thereupon, four of the tanks burst into flames while three tanks, as far as I could see, immediately left the position at high speed. I gave orders to a

> company of Pz.IVs, which was near me, to pursue and shoot up these tanks … [They] had the good fortune to come up under cover within approximately 1,000m of these Soviet tanks and to engage them from the rear. The enemy tanks stopped moving and firing – they were, as we later found out, burned out.[15]

The Soviet tanks were of course IS-2s, and were present in too small numbers to have a major effect on the battle. By midday, Manteuffel's tank crews claimed that they had shot up 250 Soviet tanks, and the tally increased steadily with further counterattacks against armoured groups that managed to break through the infantry lines. Only ten German tanks were destroyed, though several others were damaged and put out of action until they could be recovered and repaired. These claims of destroyed Soviet tanks are far higher than reported in other accounts and should be treated with caution. Many of those hit would have been in areas not under the direct control of the Germans, so it is likely that at least some were recovered by the Red Army and repaired and others were hit but not disabled or destroyed; it would also be impossible to determine whether more than one gunner had claimed a 'kill' on the same tank if the wreck wasn't captured. Konev's armies had started the day with a total of a little under 500 tanks and assault guns, and it is highly unlikely that half of these were destroyed during the fighting of 2 May. Nevertheless, the T-34 would ultimately earn the dubious distinction of being the tank type to be destroyed more frequently than any other tank in history – partly a reflection of the sheer number of T-34s constructed during the war, and partly testimony to the high loss rate in Soviet tank units.

On the eastern flank of the positions held by *Grossdeutschland*, the initial attack by the Soviet XXXV Guards Rifle Corps – part of Twenty-Seventh Army – overwhelmed the German defences and advanced towards Târgu Frumos from the northeast; it seems that the German infantry in this sector, a mixture of *Grossdeutschland* troops and men from 46th Infantry Division, proved no more resilient than the Romanians elsewhere. The Soviet XVI Tank Corps, part of Second Tank Army, reinforced by 16 IS-2s from 6th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment, advanced towards the village of Facuti, about two miles northeast of Târgu Frumos. Heavy fighting erupted in the village as elements of the Panzer Fusilier Regiment of *Grossdeutschland* tried desperately to halt the Soviet tanks. Several were destroyed or disabled through the use of *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapons and demolition charges, and some of Manteuffel's tanks appeared from the direction of Târgu Frumos to provide much-needed support.

The decisive intervention came from the east, where 24th Panzer Division had been held in readiness. Deploying in two battlegroups, Edelsheim's troops blocked any further advance by the Red Army towards the south and attacked into the rear of the Soviet penetration in the early afternoon. There were only about 24 German tanks and assault guns available but their sudden appearance from the northeast threw the Soviet troops into confusion. Far too late, XVI Tank Corps attempted to deploy its reserve brigade to protect the left flank of the Soviet advance; anticipating such a move, Edelsheim had stolen a tactic from the Red Army and had deployed an anti-tank screen, and the Soviet tanks were driven off with heavy losses. As the battle in Facuti swung in favour of the Germans, the Soviet troops in the village tried to retreat, only to find that their route was under heavy fire from 24th Panzer Division's main battlegroup. By the end of the day, Twenty-Seventh Army had fallen back to the north, leaving behind its dead and wounded.

The diversionary attacks mounted by 2nd Ukrainian Front further to the east were also unsuccessful, but despite his losses, Konev wasn't prepared to give up. Seventh Guards Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army concentrated their forces overnight with the intention of attempting to strike towards Târgu Frumos from the northwest, while Twenty-Seventh Army and Second Tank Army attacked from north of Facuti. After a further day of heavy fighting, the front line had barely moved at all. Lesser attacks continued over the next few days, but the main Soviet effort had clearly been halted. On 6 May, there was a day of relative calm as Konev's armies gave up their futile attempts to advance, and instructions arrived from *Stavka* that 2nd Ukrainian Front was to take up a defensive posture with a view to renewing its attacks nearer the end of the month; this was later postponed into June.

During this period, Malinovsky had been reorganising his units, intending to resume his attempts to take Kishinev. Of his units, Chuikov's Eighth Guards Army was perhaps in best shape, and it was ordered to take up positions in the bridgehead across the Dniester at Tashlyk. Sixth Army was disbanded and its units assigned to neighbouring armies to improve their strength, and Fifth Shock Army was ordered to deploy north of Grigoriopol. The two armies – Fifth Shock Army in the north, and Eighth Guards Army in the south – would then attack and capture Kishinev. Chuikov's memoirs describe events in just a few short paragraphs:

> By 3 May, after completing a march of 105km [63 miles], the troops of Eighth Guards Army reached the bank of the Dniester and were immediately tasked with replacing elements of General Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army in the bridgehead on the right bank of the Dniester near [Tashlyk] and concentrating in preparation for an attack.

> The bridgehead that was occupied by parts of Fifth Guards Army covered about 12km [seven miles] of front and had a depth of 5–8km. It was constantly swept with artillery fire. The heights dominating the terrain were in enemy hands. To the right of the bridgehead, along the Dniester, there were forests and groves of fruit trees. The enemy could mass troops there unobserved, and batteries of heavy weapons were also positioned there.
>
> It seemed obvious that we should expand the bridgehead to Balabanesti, Cimiseni and Speia, while widening it along the Dniester in order to eliminate enemy artillery fire. But after we entered the bridgehead, we couldn't carry out this task – three of the nine divisions were still missing. Ammunition had not been brought forward and there was a shortage of reinforcements. The troops of Fifth Guards Army and Eight Guards Army in the bridgehead had no anti-tank or anti-personnel mines.
>
> On 6 May, the Front commander Malinovsky assembled all the army commanders in the village of Malaeshty for a meeting, and outlined the operational environment. The German troops in Right Bank Ukraine [i.e. the parts of Ukraine west of the Dnieper] had been defeated and their remnants had retreated beyond the Dniester. In order to liberate Bessarabia and to strike at Bucharest and Ploesti, we were to concentrate our forces. We departed to consider how to prepare for a broad offensive with the staff officers of our formations.
>
> But during the morning of 8 May, different orders were received: the troops of the Front were to go over to a defensive posture, deeply echeloned, with preparation of at least three defensive lines over a total depth of 30–40km. This order marked a serious change in all our operational plans in the south.[16]

This account is not entirely consistent with the facts. Substantial reinforcements had actually arrived, not least through the disbandment of Sixth Army, and XXIII Tank Corps had enjoyed several days of rest and recuperation and was now approaching full strength. Nevertheless, the planned attack towards Kishinev was cancelled, largely because of the lack of progress by Konev's armies to the west; whilst the capture of Kishinev would have been a welcome success, the real purpose of Malinovsky's operation was to tie down German forces to prevent their transfer to the Iaşi-Târgu Frumos sector, and given the abandonment of 2nd Ukrainian Front's attacks, there was little point in Malinovsky proceeding as planned. Instead, the offensive was postponed, first to the last week of May, then to early June. Ultimately, the further operations of both Fronts were then delayed further while the Red Army concentrated its efforts elsewhere.

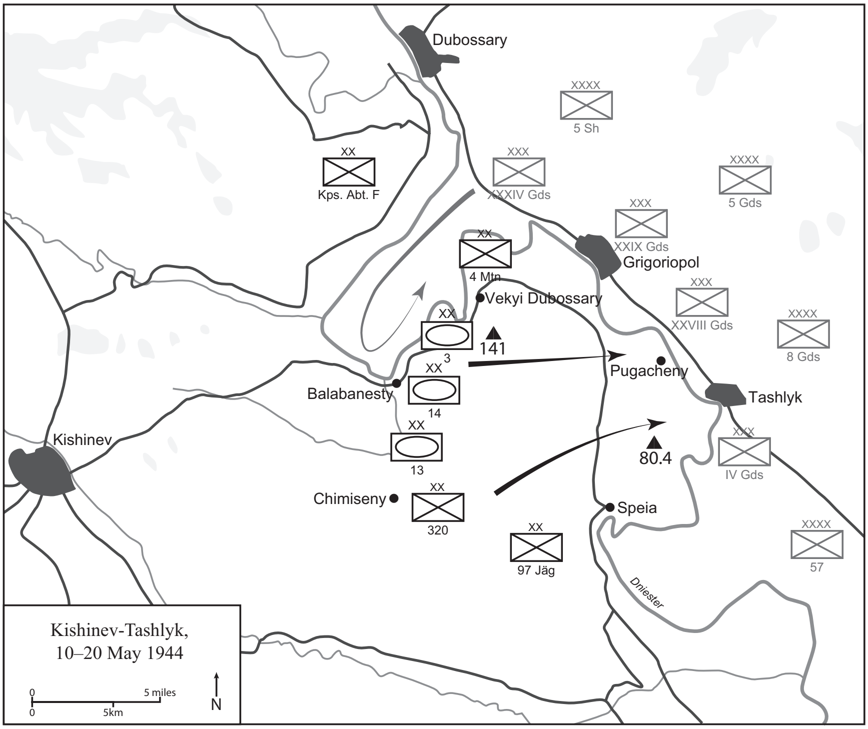
Having defeated Konev's attempts to advance towards the south, the Germans were ready to make their own attacks. On 7 May they struck at first light. Using battlegroups from *Grossdeutschland*, 24th Panzer Division and 46th Infantry Division, the Germans attacked the lines occupied by the Soviet Seventh Guards and Twenty-Seventh Armies in order to regain ground that the Red Army had captured. One of the locations attacked was Hill 254, which dominated the surrounding area. The first attack by *Grossdeutschland* was beaten off, but a later attack overran the hill. German accounts claimed that 3rd Guards Airborne Division, part of Twenty-Seventh Army's XXXV Guards Rifle Corps, was effectively wiped out in the fighting, but the official history of the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army records just 86 killed and 291 wounded.[17] Regardless of the losses inflicted, the attack by *Grossdeutschland* resulted in considerable confusion in the Soviet lines. While their opponents were scrambling to respond, the *Grossdeutschland* battlegroups withdrew to their start lines while two battlegroups from 24th Panzer Division struck from the southeast, eliminating the salient north of Facuti that the Soviet forces had gained in earlier fighting.

With his spirits already lowered by the failure of his armies to make significant advances, Konev greeted the news of these setbacks with dismay and anger. He berated Trofimenko for the setback that had allowed the Germans to recover important high ground and demanded that he take disciplinary action against the commander of XXXV Guards Rifle Corps. In addition, the hills were to be recaptured without delay. Trofimenko grimly ordered his Twenty-Seventh Army to comply, but despite several attacks, the Germans remained in control of the small line of hills.

There were German attacks along the Dniester too. Chuikov's assessment in his memoirs, though retrospective, was nonetheless accurate:

> The bridgehead … was an irritation for the enemy. Kishinev, the capital of Moldova, was about 30km [18 miles] from it as the crow flies. And the capture of Kishinev would open the gates for an attack on Bucharest, Ploesti, and the Balkans. The Hitlerite command knew this well and took all measures to eliminate the impending threat, moving to action with the immediate purpose of throwing back Soviet troops from the right bank of the Dniester.
>
> We should have expected active operations from the Germans. This accounted for the concern of *Stavka* about the construction of defensive lines on the left bank of the Dniester.[18]

Angelis' Sixth Army had caught its breath after its precipitous retreat to and across the Dniester. Just a few days of rest and the arrival of plentiful supplies transformed the combat strength and morale of divisions that had been on the brink of total collapse. In addition to his XL Panzer Corps, General Otto von Knobelsdorff took command of XLIV and LII Corps, and he assigned XLIV Corps to defend the Dniester on his northern flank, facing the town of Dubossary, while LII Corps defended the river on his southern flank. Facing the Tashlyk bridgehead was his main force, XL Panzer Corps. In this sector, while 17th, 294th, and 320th Infantry Divisions – in reality, reduced to little more than battlegroups – and *Korps Abteilung A* defended the front line along the perimeter of the bridgehead, Knobelsdorff massed 3rd, 14th and 13th Panzer Divisions, together with elements of 4th Mountain Division, 97th *Jäger* Division and 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division a little to the west in preparation for an attack to crush the Soviet foothold on the west bank. Despite their rest, the panzer divisions remained badly weakened, and even the provision of two battalions of assault guns raised their tank and assault gun strength to no more than 115. Nevertheless, this represented almost all of Sixth Army's tanks, an indication of the importance placed upon the elimination of the bridgehead.


Dubossary
XXXX
5 Sh
XX
Kps. Abt. F
XXX
XXXIV Gds
XXXX
5 Gds
XXX
XXIX Gds
Grigoriopol
XX
4 Mtn
Vekyi Dubossary
XXX
XXVIII Gds
XXXX
8 Gds
XX
3
141
Pugacheny
Tashlyk
XX
14
Balabanesty
XX
13
Kishinev
80.4
XXX
IV Gds
Chimiseny
XX
320
Speia
XX
97 Jäg
XXXX
57
Dniester
0
5 miles
0
5km
N

Kishinev-Tashlyk,
10–20 May 1944

In order to maximise the chances of achieving surprise, Knobelsdorff attacked several hours before dawn on 10 May after a brief artillery bombardment. On the northern flank of the attack, 2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Division succeeded in taking the first line of Soviet defences and the units of 3rd Panzer Division then moved forward with their tanks in wedge formation. The objective of the attack was an area of high ground known to the Germans as 'Helmet Hill' (Hill 141 on the accompanying map) and Lang, commander of 3rd Panzer Division, had hoped that he would at least reach the foot of the hill before dawn. However, as it grew light, the German spearhead encountered its first properly organised obstacle in the shape of a defensive line along a low ridge. With fighting continuing in the rear areas while the Germans mopped up bypassed Soviet troops, 3rd Panzer Division tried to prise the Soviet defenders from their positions along the ridge, but it was now caught in relatively open ground with the Soviet-occupied ridge on one side and the Dniester on the other, with Soviet guns on the far bank beginning to open fire. With casualties steadily accumulating, the Germans pulled back a short distance to regroup before attacking again. In mid-morning, after further artillery preparation, they managed to overrun Helmet Hill, but losses had been substantial. Lang's division started the attack with 24 tanks; by the time the hill was captured, it had only six still running.[19]

Unrein's 14th Panzer Division was attacking towards Helmet Hill a little to the south. As it grew light, it too came under heavy fire. Gathering the vehicles of the two assault gun battalions, his reconnaissance battalion and a panzergrenadier battalion, Unrein created a new battlegroup and ordered it to attack over the southern side of Helmet Hill. Despite the commitment of their local reinforcements, the Soviet defenders had to give way as their ammunition began to run out. At the southern end of the bridgehead, battlegroups from 13th Panzer Division, 320th Infantry Division and 97th *Jäger* Division slowly pushed forward. A Soviet account of the battle gives a flavour of the fighting:

> On the left wing [of 35th Guards Rifle Division], the Hitlerites had already managed to capture the trenches of 93rd Rifle Division's 51st Regiment, which our 102nd Regiment was to have occupied … In difficult circumstances, 102nd Regiment was forced to occupy defences in an anti-tank ditch west of Gospodskii Dvor …
>
> For good reason, the enemy commanders assumed that the ravine on 100th Regiment's right flank was the weakest point in the defence. Accordingly they moved a large body of infantry and tanks through the ravine towards Hill 80.4 and thus won space for further operations.

> After taking over the defensive sector of 284th Regiment's gunners, the commander of 100th Regiment's artillery, Senior Lieutenant Varennikov, combined the fire of all his artillery and most of the mortar units on the slopes of the hill next to the ravine …
>
> At the same time a crisis developed in the sector of 47th Guards Rifle Division's 140th Regiment. Varennikov immediately ordered one battery to change its firing position to give fire support to its neighbour on the right …
>
> The situation was also difficult in XXVIII Guards Rifle Corps' sector, where the Hitlerites drove back our units and occupied Pugacheny and Hill 80.4. As a result, 35th Guards Rifle Division's right flank was badly exposed.[20]

Despite suffering substantial losses, the Germans had achieved considerable success, penetrating into the centre of the Soviet bridgehead and throwing Chuikov's forces into disarray. On 11 May, Knobelsdorff altered the axis of his attack somewhat towards the south with the intention of reaching and destroying the one major bridge across the Dniester within the bridgehead. Overnight, Chuikov had concentrated his artillery resources to stop the Germans and he claimed that the massed fire of his guns stopped the German attack in its tracks. Nevertheless, German pressure continued over the next few days, with both sides suffering losses for little gain of ground. When fighting finally died down on 23 May, the Soviet Eighth Guards Army was still in possession of its foothold on the west bank of the Dniester, but the size of the bridgehead was greatly reduced, making it far harder for the Red Army to concentrate sufficient forces to mount an effective breakout towards the west. In addition, Eighth Guards Army suffered heavy losses, and would be unable to take part in a major attack without replenishment and reinforcement. The price that the Germans paid for this success was considerable, with 14th Panzer Division's two panzergrenadier regiments, reconnaissance battalion and pioneer battalion collectively having too few men to field the equivalent of a single battalion.[21]

In an attempt to reduce the pressure on the Tashlyk bridgehead, Malinovsky ordered Fifth Guards Army, which had deployed in the Grigoriopol area, to launch an attack against the German bridgehead north of Tashlyk. Originally, this attack was to be combined with an assault by Chuikov's forces towards Kishinev, but Knobelsdorff's attack resulted in the Soviet timetable being brought forward in order to break into the area from where XL Panzer Corps' artillery was operating. Before dawn on 14 May, a 30-minute artillery bombardment struck the German defences, followed by an attack by XXXIV Guards Rifle Corps, supported by a tank brigade. The soldiers of the German 17th Infantry Division were taken by surprise. Hastily, they pulled back with much of 17th Infantry Division withdrawing across the Dniester, leaving the Red Army in possession of a stretch of land bounded to the north, west and south by the river, with some parts of the east bank still in German hands. Malinovsky met Colonel Gavriil Stanislavovich Zdanovich, commander of 203rd Rifle Division to discuss further steps. The German positions surrounding the river bend were on higher ground, and it was imperative for the Soviet forces to try to drive the Germans out of their positions.

Knobelsdorff had no intention of waiting for Fifth Shock Army to attack him. The Soviet attempt to eliminate the remaining German pockets on the west bank was intended to begin on 15 May, and after driving back 17th Infantry Division, the Soviet soldiers endured a day of constant artillery attacks. That evening, Knobelsdorff moved two infantry battlegroups – one from 294th Infantry Division, one from *Korps Abteilung F* – across the Dniester at either side of the narrow neck of the loop in the river. They were to attack towards each other, with a battlegroup of 14th Panzer Division joining them once the advance had begun. Zdanovich, the commander of 203rd Rifle Division, described how the battle unfolded:

> A fierce battle ensued, which in terms of the number of casualties among senior officers was the worst our division ever experienced. Our units, which were preparing to cross the Dniester, didn't pay enough attention to defensive positions and didn't dig trenches, bunkers and shelters. When German bombers appeared in the clear May sky after the artillery attack [early on 15 May], the situation became critical.
>
> The telephone operators struggled to establish contact with 619th Regiment, all of whose actions were clearly visible – the regiment was literally 1km from the division command post. Seeing that the Nazis were conducting a hurricane bombardment of its positions, I tried to contact Lieutenant Colonel Yaremchuk. Instead of the regiment commander, the assistant chief of staff answered the phone. 'Methodius Platonovich Yaremchuk is seriously wounded,' he reported. 'His deputies, Majors Alexander Mikhailovich Bachkin and Vasily Aleksandrovich Antonov, were wounded by bomb shrapnel. The Party officials of the regiment, Captains Arsenty Petrovich Obernihin and Nikolai Vasilyevich Fedyakin, battalion commander Captain Alexey Alekseevich Bronsky and all company commanders are also out of action.'
>
> … By this time, the right flank of 619th Regiment was wavering and beginning to retreat towards my command post. 'All staff officers! In a chain!'

> I ordered. 'Stop the retreating soldiers and throw back the enemy!' The battle raged 500m from my command post. The staff officers encountered the troops of 619th Regiment in the scrub near the bank. Seeing them, the troops quickly regained confidence and returned to action. The attack was repulsed.[22]

Seeing that the Germans were bringing forward reserves in order to renew their attack, Zdanovich ordered the reserve battalion of 619th Regiment to move into the battle line. At that moment, he was wounded by shellfire. Nevertheless, he remained at his post and his men fought off the Germans for much of the day. During the afternoon, after a Stuka attack, the German infantry pressed forward once more. Several other officers of the division were killed in the fighting that followed, but for the moment the Soviet line held. Zdanovich was evacuated to the rear, with command of the division passing to his chief of staff.

Amongst the vehicles deployed by the Red Army were SU76 assault guns. Built on the chassis of the T70 light tank, the SU76 – at this stage of the war, mainly in the form of the modified 'M' version with a revised engine layout and open fighting compartment – inherited the same double engine design that had been used in the T70. It was a simple but sometimes troublesome vehicle for its crews, often nicknamed *Sukha* or *Suchka* ('bitch' or 'little bitch'). In particular, there was a constant fear of fire. Arseniy Niklaevich Zonov was a crewman in a battalion of SU76s that were sent across the Dniester in May to take part in the fighting against Knobelsdorff's attack:

> When we dug in, we always made a dugout under the machine. When we were in defensive positions, there was no shelter in the vehicle. I was on duty as a gunner and the driver was sitting in his seat while the rest of the crew were in the dugout.
>
> At 0400 the Germans set the nearby village ablaze … The Germans attacked from the cemetery and opened fire. I decided we should change position as we couldn't fire in that direction from our entrenchment. We moved off but then became stuck. Other crews were in the cellar of a dilapidated house and only a few were in position. When the fighting began people ran everywhere and became mixed up, and my commander ended up in another vehicle. He jumped out and at that moment a shell or a mine exploded. Another officer helped me bandage my lieutenant. Our vehicle was hit. My lieutenant said we should move off, but it was useless as our vehicle was stuck and couldn't move forward or back. And the Germans came closer.
>
> I jumped out of the vehicle. Between us, we had three Nagants [revolvers], a submachine-gun, and grenades. I took a grenade from a rack and put it in my

> pocket, and grabbed a gun. As I leapt out, I was hit as if by a wave … There was a flash of fire and my whole face was scorched. I turned to look back and at that moment the vehicle exploded. I was hurled about 5m by the blast …
>
> My overcoat was smouldering and my face and neck were scorched. I took my vehicle commander to the medical battalion on the riverbank … The attack was repulsed but only one of our six vehicles was left. After I had got my commander to the medical battalion, it was dawn and Ilyushin attack aircraft were overhead. I decided to return to the front – I did not have permission to retreat. I thought, if I go to the rear, they'll ask me why I ran. I made my way back. My assault gun was a wreck, the gearbox blown away to one side. Our gun was on one side of the road and in front of it was a German tank. A German lay half out of its hatch. Our crew told me that they had fired on the tank at almost point blank range, about 10m at most, before we were hit.[23]

Both sides fed more troops into the battle. However, the geography of the fighting was heavily in favour of the Germans who steadily increased pressure on the Soviet salient. By the evening of 19 May, the two German battlegroups were almost in touching range and the Soviet position became impossible. Major General Nikolai Matveevich Makovchuk, commander of XXXIV Guards Rifle Corps, had no choice but to order his men to try to escape. Even extracting the remnants of his divisions would be difficult, given the near-encirclement achieved by the Germans:

> This was the decisive battle. It was vital to gather all the remaining men and weapons who were scattered throughout the salient into a single group unobtrusively before dark, and to assemble a wagon train with the wounded and our equipment. The soldiers of a battalion from 592nd Regiment, led by Komsomol Lieutenant Chumachenko, were given a vital mission – to form the rearguard. Before evening, our artillery opened a heavy barrage on a group of German tanks east of Koshnitsa and salvos of Katyushas struck infantry who were sheltering in woodland west of the village of Vekyi Dubossary. The attack surprised the enemy and inflicted heavy losses.
>
> By now, the encircled troops had regrouped. All wounded who could walk returned to the ranks. Those who couldn't were placed on wagons or gun carriages. At a pre-arranged signal, all the soldiers of 203rd and 243rd Rifle Divisions capable of holding weapons formed up close to the wagon train, the field kitchens, and the gun carriages, and with a mighty 'Urrah!' moved against the encirclement. The Nazis fired indiscriminately and began to run in panic from the avalanche

> rolling down on them. Our tanks moved ahead. They crushed the enemy obstacles. One armoured vehicle failed to turn and slid down the steep Dniester bank into the river. Its crew, including two famous officers of our division, Heroes of the Soviet Union Captains Shikunov and Korneev, were killed. Surprised by the suddenness and speed of our breakout, many of the Nazis hid in their trenches and put up no resistance.
>
> Most of the corps had escaped by 0100 on 20 May. Almost all the wounded, the guns and other equipment were saved. Major Kolesnikov was wounded during the breakout but he didn't leave the battlefield until he was certain that all the soldiers of 203rd Regiment were out of danger. Only those covering the withdrawal were left behind. Twelve soldiers personally led by Chumachenko failed to move quickly enough to join the breakout and were left in the bridgehead.
>
> But Soviet people do not lose heart even in the most difficult situation. For three days, the soldiers of Chumachenko's group were on their own. During the day they hid in the undergrowth and at night they tried to move. Using their bayonets they silently overcame the enemy blocking units. Their path was not easy, but perseverance, willpower, and soldierly courage prevailed and they managed to reach us.[24]

XXXIV Guards Rifle Corps might have escaped complete destruction, but there was no doubt that it had been badly mauled. Any thought of attacking towards Kishinev without a pause while reinforcements were brought forward had to be abandoned. It seems that the setbacks along the Dniester, combined with Konev's failure to break through at Târgu Frumos, also contributed to changes in command in the Red Army. Tolbukhin's 4th Ukrainian Front had been turned south to deal with Crimea, and was now to be reorganised before being inserted back into the main front line facing the Axis powers, and Tolbukhin and his chief of staff were moved to take command of 3rd Ukrainian Front. Malinovsky moved to take command of 2nd Ukrainian Front, and Konev replaced Zhukov as commander of 1st Ukrainian Front. This effectively released Zhukov from commanding a Front and made him available for coordination of several Fronts as a '*Stavka* representative', the role that he had played prior to the death of Vatutin. It also moved Konev from command of what was largely a secondary axis of operations – south, into Romania – to the main sector for the coming summer, facing Poland. Despite his failures at Târgu Frumos, Konev was still regarded by Stalin as one of his most capable and aggressive Front commanders, and the Soviet leader naturally wished to have his best men in command of the most important sectors.

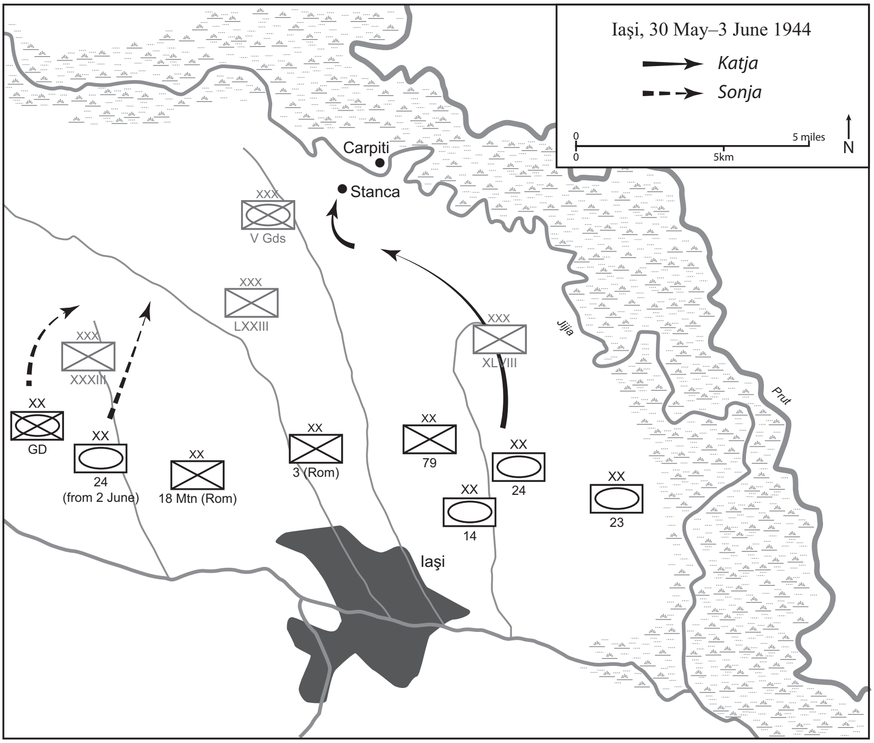
After being relieved of its positions by Chukov's Eighth Guards Army, Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army was ordered to proceed to the Iaşi sector. Its first elements reached the area in mid-May, and any lingering possibility of 2nd Ukrainian Front resuming its failed offensive before the end of the month was now gone. Instead, a tentative date was set for the first week of June. Before he left, Konev had started planning a resumption, concentrating on attacking Iaşi rather than Târgu Frumos. To that end, Twenty-Seventh Army and Second Tank Army were to move a little east from their current positions so that they could attack in combination with Fifty-Second Army and Sixth Tank Army; Fifth Guards Tank Army was pulled out of line to be replenished, prior to being used in the forthcoming summer offensive against the German Army Group Centre. The new offensive was to capture Iaşi as its first objective, and then advance further to the south to seize parts of the Strunga Line about ten miles further south. In terms of scale, this was a far more modest set of objectives than those for previous plans, and perhaps more proportionate to the forces available.

Even as Malinovsky arrived to take command of 2nd Ukrainian Front, *Stavka* postponed the operation 'indefinitely'. Nevertheless, the regrouping required for the new attack was already under way, and had been spotted by German reconnaissance. Soviet signal traffic also showed poor discipline, allowing the Germans to monitor troop movements. In order to confirm his suspicions, Wöhler ordered a reconnaissance probe to the northwest of Târgu Frumos by the reconnaissance battalion of *Grossdeutschland*. This confirmed the concentration of Soviet units and, unaware that Malinovsky had been ordered to postpone any operation, Wöhler decided to strike with an armoured force to destroy the Soviet concentration. The German Eighth Army had 23rd and 24th Panzer Divisions available in reserve, and Wöhler now took steps to increase his striking power. *Grossdeutschland* and *SS-Totenkopf* were pulled out of the front line with their sectors being assigned to infantry formations. In addition, Wöhler requested additional reinforcements, and with the approval of *OKH*, Schörner ordered 14th Panzer Division to be transferred from Sixth Army; although its panzer and panzergrenadier regiments remained significantly below strength, its artillery regiment was still a powerful asset and the division could be used to release other, more powerful units. After his success on the Dniester, Knobelsdorff was also sent to Eighth Army, to take command of the offensive.

Eighth Army's plans involved two operations. The first, codenamed *Sonja*, would see 23rd and 24th Panzer Divisions, supported by 79th Infantry Division on the western flank, attacking north on 30 May to capture a line of low hills along the southern bank of the Jijia River. This phase was expected to be completed within one day, and 24th Panzer Division was then to withdraw, handing over its sector to 14th Panzer Division. By this date, *Grossdeutschland* would have completed its move from the Târgu Frumos sector and, in combination with 24th Panzer Division, would carry out the second phase of the offensive, codenamed *Katja*. This envisaged a drive into the area north of Podu Iloaiei, again aiming to reach the Jijia River. Over two days, this thrust would turn the western flank of the Soviet units south of the Jijia and thus drive them back across the river. The two operations would leave the Red Army occupying the boggy, frequently flooded corridor of land between the Jijia and the Prut, making a resumption of any attack towards Iaşi almost impossible.

During May, 24th Panzer Division had continued to regain its strength after its painful retreat to the Dniester. In keeping with widespread practice in panzer divisions, Edelsheim organised his main armoured assets – his 30 tanks, a half-track battalion of panzergrenadiers, the armoured reconnaissance battalion, and an armoured artillery battalion – into an armoured battlegroup under the command of Oberst Siegfried von Waldenburg, commander of the division's 26th Panzergrenadier Regiment. Other elements of the division – two battalions of truck-mounted panzergrenadiers, reinforced by a 20-strong battalion of assault guns – were under the command of Oberstleutnant Hans-Egon von Einem, commander of 21st Panzergrenadier Regiment. This was far from the division's nominal strength, but 24th Panzer Division was still stronger than either 23rd Panzer Division or 14th Panzer Division, which collectively could field no more than about 40 tanks and assault guns. By contrast, *Grossdeutschland* still possessed about 100 tanks and assault guns.

After a brief but intense artillery bombardment, *Sonja* got under way early on 30 May and rapidly ran into Soviet minefields and anti-tank obstacles; well-positioned Soviet anti-tank guns opened fire from the western flank. While 24th Panzer Division's sappers worked to clear the mines, artillery fire was directed against the Soviet anti-tank guns and the advance resumed with pockets of Soviet troops surfacing behind the German advance. Several locations had to be secured a second time by the second wave of German troops, and by the time this had been achieved, the Red Army had deployed further anti-tank guns. Nevertheless, with 23rd Panzer Division operating a little to the east and 79th Infantry Division to the west, the German group pushed forward most of the way to the Jijia. The Soviet defenders – from Koroteyev's Fifty-Second Army – suffered substantial losses, and Koroteyev scrambled to dispatch reinforcements. Koroteyev's troops had fared best against 79th Infantry Division, and in order to reduce the threat to his left wing, Knobelsdorff ordered 14th Panzer Division


Iaşi, 30 May–3 June 1944
Katja
Sonja
0
5 miles
0
5km
N
Carpiti
Stanca
XXX
V Gds
XXX
LXXIII
XXX
XXXIII
XXX
XLVIII
Jijia
Prut
XX
GD
XX
24
(from 2 June)
XX
18 Mtn (Rom)
XX
3 (Rom)
XX
79
XX
24
XX
14
XX
23
Iaşi

to deploy in support of 79th Infantry Division. Seven of the tanks of 14th Panzer Division, half of its tank strength, consisted of captured Soviet T-34s. Throughout 31 May, there was heavy fighting as the Germans – with Romanian infantry operating alongside 23rd Panzer Division to the east – levered the Soviet defenders from their positions, but most of the south bank of the Jijia remained in Soviet hands; 14th Panzer Division reported the loss of its last two assault guns. Several days of Soviet counterattacks followed with little change in the positions held by either side.

Although the Red Army hadn't been driven back across the Jijia as originally intended, it was time to proceed with *Katja* and 24th Panzer Division pulled out to regroup alongside *Grossdeutschland*. Early on 2 June, *Katja* began with early successes as the Germans easily penetrated the weak defences of Major General Aleksei Ivanovich Semenov's XXXIII Rifle Corps. Indeed, the Panther tanks of *Grossdeutschland* were delayed more by swampy ground than Soviet resistance, but a steady stream of reinforcements and repeated Soviet air attacks resulted in the German advance slowing as the day progressed. Nevertheless, the first day's objectives were largely secured with an advance of about five miles, and on 3 June 24th Panzer Division turned its axis of advance towards the northeast.

Fresh from the mauling of his armies along the Dniester, the German attack must have come as a particularly unpleasant surprise for Malinovsky. The advance by *Grossdeutschland* and 24th Panzer Division on 2 June badly disrupted his plans for a counterattack to drive back the German forces that had attacked on 30 May, but when the Germans attempted to exploit their gains, they now met far tougher resistance. *Grossdeutschland* had to deal with several Soviet counterattacks and was unable to make any further progress until 4 June; 24th Panzer Division ground its way forward, aided by the fact that its advance received supporting fire from 14th Panzer Division, a little to the east. The commander of a panzergrenadier company gave a flavour of the fighting in his account:

> We had brought the half-tracks forward during the night [before 3 June]. In the morning we covered the tanks to our left while they resupplied. From the left – we couldn't see from where – heavy tank shells flew over our heads. We turned away. Our vehicle sank into an unsighted ditch. We were badly bruised, and the front axle was broken. We dismounted and pushed on through a small bog. There we came across a couple of half-tracks from the other battalion. We advanced onto a hill with six tanks. It was south of Hill 180, and in front of us was the Moimesti valley. Anti-tank guns were firing from the left. I had no radio. The second platoon drove up onto the hill. I couldn't stop them. The leading vehicle took a direct hit that passed right through, leaving round holes in the sides and killing one man. It was Rittmeister Hoffmann. With him, the division lost one of its best battalion commanders, an officer who, with sweeping drive and the reckless commitment of himself and his endless energy, always led his men as a role model. Throughout the long time that he was with the division, during which he rose from NCO to battalion commander, he played an important part in the successes that the division achieved during the war.
>
> After the destruction of two anti-tank guns and numerous anti-tank rifles, we were able to seize the high ground right in front of Hill 180. As it advanced on towards Hill 162, like the two panzergrenadier battalions the battlegroup came under intense fire from heavy weapons from Moimesti and from Hill 162, particularly on this hill where the enemy had reinforced his positions with more anti-tank guns and at least 12 tanks, and without simultaneous attacks by our left and right neighbours it was impossible to advance.[25]

Finally, on 6 June, Knobelsdorff called a halt. The strength of his units had ebbed away alarmingly, and there was little prospect of a decisive advance in view of stiffening resistance. The battlegroups of 24th Panzer Division were stalled in front of the village of Stanca; it recorded that since the beginning of April, it had lost nearly 2,000 officers and men killed, wounded or missing. If *Stavka* hadn't cancelled the planned attack on Iaşi, the Soviet strength in the sector would have been greater still, and German losses would have been even heavier. As it was, Knobelsdorff and Wöhler could claim a partial success. Sufficient damage had been inflicted on 2nd Ukrainian Front to prevent any early resumption of offensive operations by the Red Army.

The battles of May and June were chastening setbacks for 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts. A report by Trofimenko's headquarters about the failed attempt to capture Târgu Frumos concluded that the Germans had been occupying deep, well-constructed defences, and there had been poor coordination of Soviet artillery and air support with the advancing troops. It had also been impossible to deploy sufficient anti-tank assets with the attacking troops to give them protection against German counterattacks, and the Soviet tank units were poorly handled – they were often deployed in small groups of up to 20 tanks instead of en masse. There were also clear signs that the infantry forces used in the attack were of poorer calibre than had been the case in the past; replacement drafts were inadequately trained, and as has been described in the fighting in the Crimean peninsula, many divisions had attempted to replenish their ranks using barely trained men from the newly liberated regions of the western Soviet Union. There appears to have been considerable complacency amongst Soviet commanders, who had become accustomed to overrunning hastily organised German defences and then pursuing a broken enemy. To encounter rested and well-organised units, particularly *Grossdeutschland* with its impressive array of armour, was an entirely different matter.

The German counterattacks also came as an unpleasant shock, especially in the light of the repeated – and clearly exaggerated – claims of casualties inflicted upon the Germans during the Red Army's advance to the Southern Bug and Dniester. From the German perspective, the successes on the Dniester, and the far lesser success of *Sonja* and *Katja*, gave hope that the Red Army could still be stopped by determined defence. Naturally, the critics of Manstein were quick to point out that this turn in fortunes coincided with the arrival of Model and Schörner at the front, but the reality was that, together with the appearance of Romanian divisions in the front line, the German retreat had allowed the Wehrmacht to concentrate its resources and then to strike at Soviet units operating at the end of overstretched supply lines.

But despite its setbacks, the Red Army remained dominant. After a suitable pause during which supplies and reinforcements were brought forward, and roads, bridges and railways were restored, the Red Army would be able to attack again, with far greater likelihood of success. By contrast, there was no prospect of the Wehrmacht ever regaining sufficient strength to be able to set the agenda at an operational level.

CHAPTER 11

PREPARING FOR SUMMER

In both world wars, fighting usually died down on the Eastern Front during the *Rasputitsa* or 'muddy season', in the autumn and spring. In 1944, the spring thaw brought relative calm to the northern and central sectors, but as has been described, major operations continued despite appalling weather conditions in the south until mutual exhaustion forced the combatants to pause for breath. Even if they had wished to continue fighting at the same intensity, a pause was essential to bring forward reinforcements and supplies, and for the Soviet authorities to repair bridges, roads and railways across the huge swathe of territory that had been liberated by the Red Army.

A year before, the opposing armies had found themselves approximately back where they had been during the spring thaw of 1942, with the Wehrmacht holding a front line along the Donets and Mius on the eastern borders of Ukraine. But this initial similarity disguised substantial changes. The Wehrmacht of 1943 was far weaker than it had been 12 months before. In addition to the destruction of Sixth Army in Stalingrad, the front line had been stabilised only by the transfer of large reserve forces from the west. The Red Army had also suffered losses – it should be remembered that Soviet casualties were consistently higher than those suffered by the Germans and their allies – but with tank production in full flow by early 1943, the losses in equipment could be made good in a far shorter time than that required for the Germans to recover.

By the spring of 1944, the battlefield had changed beyond all recognition. The Wehrmacht had been driven back from its Donets-Mius front line to the western borders of Ukraine. The valleys of the Dnepr and Southern Bug, both regarded as potential defensive lines, had fallen into Soviet hands before the

Germans could organise themselves for prolonged resistance. Although the Wehrmacht had managed to extract most of its forces from the numerous encirclements that had occurred during the year, losses in equipment had been substantial and most infantry and panzer divisions would need extensive re-equipment before they could be regarded as ready for combat. The relentless pursuit of the retreating Germans had taken a heavy toll on the Red Army too, but its advantages were considerable. It was in a position to recover all of its broken-down and damaged vehicles; and Soviet tank production continued to soar far above German production. Exhausted tank armies had been restored to full strength several times during 1943, and the spring pause would be ample time for this process to be repeated once again.

The situation had changed in other ways too. Albert Speer, the German armaments minister, had achieved astonishing improvements in the productivity of German industry, eliminating many wasteful practices and simplifying and streamlining production wherever possible, but this had been at a price. Reserves of key minerals were beginning to run low and were being consumed at an unsustainable rate. As 1944 progressed, it would prove impossible for tungsten to continue to be used in the same quantities as before to harden anti-tank ammunition, and troops in the front line would soon be submitting reports of rounds failing to penetrate their targets, often fragmenting on impact. Hitler had repeatedly dismissed strategic and operational concerns raised by his generals on the grounds that they did not understand economic and industrial matters – such arguments had featured strongly in Hitler's wishes to avoid retreating from the eastern and central parts of Ukraine – but regardless of who had been right in those arguments, there was no question that Germany was running out of resources. The loss of Crimea brought the Romanian oilfields within range of Soviet bombers in addition to British and American aircraft, and the fuel shortages that had frequently crippled German operations could be expected to get progressively worse.

To date, the Wehrmacht had been able to compensate for its material inferiority by exploiting the skills of its soldiers. The high level of training and initiative of all leaders, from NCOs to the highest ranks, allowed the Germans to operate with a level of flexibility that was far higher than that achieved by other armies. This, too, was a greatly diminished resource. The high casualty rate amongst officers and NCOs was steadily eliminating these skilled, experienced men, and in any case the ever-increasing rigidity imposed from above left them with greatly reduced room for manoeuvre. Hitler continued to cling to the belief that new, improved weapons would turn the tide, but there was little or no sign of such a change. The programme to build improved U-boats – the type XXI and type XXIII vessels – was running behind schedule, not least because on this occasion, Speer's innovations were less successful; he had tried to increase production by awarding contracts to companies with little or no experience of ship construction, resulting in considerable delays. Consequently, there was little sign of the new U-boats entering service in sufficient numbers to turn the tide. And whilst individual German tanks might be superior to those of the Soviet Union, they were present in far too small numbers to alter the outcome of the war. The constant search for improvement in tank design also proved detrimental. Production of the Tiger tank totalled fewer than 1,400, but constant alterations to individual components meant that there were never more than a handful of vehicles that were completely identical. This, together with the underlying complexity of the design, created maintenance and repair nightmares for units in the field. Although reliability of the Panther tank had been improved, it still remained prone to breakdown, and the poor quality of synthetic rubber seals resulted in problems with fuel leakage, making the tanks prone to catching fire.

At first glance, the survival of the German Army Group South during the first months of 1944 appears to be a remarkable achievement, given the number of times its front line was shattered and the manner in which so many units were encircled. But its survival came at a huge price. As fighting finally died down in May, the Wehrmacht had committed every available unit to shoring up the southern sector of the Eastern Front. Other areas had been stripped of reserves, and a total of 25 regular infantry divisions, a *Ski-Jäger* brigade that was then enlarged to form a full division, a security division, a mountain division, two heavy tank battalions, and five assault gun battalions had been transferred to the sector. The inevitable consequence of this was that there were no meaningful reserves available anywhere else. The complete collapse of Army Group South was avoided, but the cost was enormous – about 550,000 men and 850 tanks and assault guns had been committed to the sector. Any further crises would have to be met with whatever forces were available locally, and any Soviet attack on other sectors would benefit greatly from the manner in which units had been sent south.

The war was also taking a toll on the Red Army. It had started the conflict with its officer corps still recovering from Stalin's purges of the 1930s, and with overly rigid political oversight of all military decisions. The huge setbacks that resulted forced a rapid and ongoing reappraisal and by the spring of 1944, the army had changed beyond recognition. Formations were now far more optimally organised and officers had learned their craft in the toughest of environments, but the huge casualties that the Red Army continued to experience resulted in a steady erosion of these experienced men. However, it is worth noting that, as has been the case in many conflicts, the highest casualty rates were amongst the least experienced men, i.e. new drafts, especially those who were 'impressed' into the ranks as parts of Ukraine were reoccupied. Consequently, experienced men tended to survive despite the overall losses. But the sheer size of the Red Army brought its own problems in terms of training its personnel. Just as the British had found when preparing for the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the difficulties of providing adequate training for very large numbers of men were considerable, and the increasingly technological nature of warfare exacerbated this problem. To an extent, this ensured that the design of Soviet weaponry was kept relatively simple and standardised. German tanks might be more advanced and more sophisticated, but Soviet tanks were easier to operate and maintain.

Perhaps the biggest contrast between the two sides was their attitude to analysing battles and learning lessons. On the German side, there was little or no attempt to carry out such analysis, and instead Hitler imposed an increasingly rigid control from above. By contrast, the disciplines that had saved the Red Army and allowed it to evolve rapidly after the German invasion in 1941 continued to be put to use. The battles of the winter were analysed and reports written; whilst some of the lessons might have been learned imperfectly, at least there was an attempt to analyse events in order to improve performance. Attention focused on the encirclement at Korsun, and the failure to reduce the pocket quickly. This subject had been considered before, but the conclusions now were that the main obstacle had been logistics rather than the mix of forces used. Delays in bringing forward artillery and more importantly artillery ammunition, and problems refuelling units as they advanced rapidly, were seen as the main issues that needed to be remedied. Any future offensive would require greater stockpiles of ammunition and fuel, and steps would be taken to ensure that it was moved forward as quickly as possible. Unlike Wehrmacht units, Soviet divisions did not have integral logistic columns, and despite the production of large numbers of trucks – and the provision of even larger numbers from the USA – logistic support remained a serious problem.

The Red Army still lagged behind the Wehrmacht in another critical area: the provision of vehicle recovery and repair teams. Although its victorious advance ensured that, eventually, damaged vehicles would return to front-line service, the process was far slower than that achieved by the Germans. Further refinements in organisation were made in order to improve this for the summer of 1944, as it was widely recognised that breakdowns accounted for a significant proportion of vehicle attrition, and even a partial solution would improve the ability of motorised formations to sustain operations at a high tempo. However, the sheer scale of the Red Army once more created problems: it simply wasn't possible to find sufficient trained personnel to provide the level of support required.

Whilst Hitler's rigid system of command and control prevented any realistic high-level evaluation of the evolving nature of warfare on the Eastern Front, commanders in the field were acutely aware of such changes and did what they could to respond. However, such changes were inevitably restricted by Hitler's insistence on holding on to every inch of ground, and moreover were not shared widely, with the result that whilst tactics might change in a given location, different changes would be implemented elsewhere. As a consequence, there was little sharing of 'best practice', and the panzer divisions – shuffled from one crisis area to another – often found that German troops in their new area of operations were functioning somewhat differently to those in the sector they had just left. As the fighting in First Panzer Army's sector died down, Raus and his chief of staff, Oberst Carl Wagener, analysed the recent fighting. One of their conclusions was that the Red Army was making effective use of massed artillery barrages at the outset of their assaults, crushing forward defensive positions and neutralising German artillery with accurate counter-battery fire; air attacks on command posts had also often been effective. Attacks on reserve units – using artillery against reserves held close to the front line and aircraft against those held further back – frequently resulted in delayed deployment, as did shelling of approach roads. Massed Soviet armour was then unleashed, often before a full penetration of the defences by attacking Soviet infantry, and despite heavy losses, these tank formations would then rapidly press on into the rear of German positions. However, Raus and Wagener concluded that the Red Army also continued to show considerable weaknesses. In particular, it was slow to move its artillery forward after an initial advance, meaning that there was often a window of opportunity for a counterattack to restore the German line, provided that reserves had not been compromised by the initial Soviet bombardment.

In order to counter the Red Army, the officers of Raus' headquarters concluded that they had few options. There were insufficient resources to construct a sufficiently hardened line to protect troops from Soviet artillery fire and air attack, and it would be preferable to adopt a mode of defence that had been pioneered by the Germans in the last months of the First World War: infantry units in the front line would abandon their positions when an enemy attack was imminent and would retire a short distance to a series of positions that had been specifically prepared to be the main defensive line. As a result, the Soviet bombardment would fall on largely empty trenches, and German artillery – which would also relocate to alternative positions immediately before the Soviet attack – would then shell the advancing Soviet troops. An alternative was a variation on methods used by Model elsewhere on the Eastern Front:

> Another form of tactical evasion that we envisioned can best be compared with sabre-fencing tactics. A cut is warded off by sudden retirement with appropriate guard, followed by an immediate counterthrust that permits the fencer to regain his former position. Like the fencer, the forces, holding the threatened sector execute a surprise withdrawal at the last moment, moving far enough to the rear that the blow misses, the pursuing enemy can be repelled, and the initial position regained through a prompt counterattack. In order to satisfy these requirements, the terrain in which the enemy pursuit is intercepted must be well chosen and systematically prepared so that the withdrawing force can resume the defence within a few hours.[1]

Whether Hitler would permit commanders sufficient flexibility to defend in any of these manners remained to be seen.

Although 1943 and the first part of 1944 had seen substantial Soviet gains, there had also been setbacks. In the north, the lifting of the siege of Leningrad was followed by an advance to the Narva River, where the Wehrmacht mounted a skilful and sustained defence against numerically superior forces. Any attempt to renew offensive operations in this sector would require the Red Army either to attack across the Narva and then through a comparatively narrow neck of land between the Gulf of Finland in the north and Lake Peipus in the south, or to attempt an advance south of Lake Peipus. The former would result in the advance being on very easily predictable axes, as the terrain was further narrowed by considerable areas of swampy woodland around Lake Peipus; even if a successful assault managed to break out into the Estonian interior, the Germans could simply abandon northern Estonia and still stop the Soviet offensive. An attack from south of Lake Peipus would potentially have both its flanks vulnerable to counterattack, and was unlikely to achieve any decisive success. In the central region, the initial Soviet counteroffensive after the Battle of Kursk – codenamed *Kutuzov* – drove the Germans back a considerable distance, but at a huge cost;

German losses amounted to nearly 84,000 men, but the Red Army lost nearly 430,000.[2] This was followed by the Smolensk Operation, in which the Germans lost another 75,000 men, but once more the cost to the Red Army was disproportionately high, with over 450,000 killed, wounded or missing.[3] Although Smolensk was recaptured and the German position around Vitebsk turned into a prominent salient, the Soviet forces would require a prolonged period of rest and replenishment to bring them back to effective strength. Nevertheless, when combined with the major Soviet advances across Ukraine, the German Army Group Centre was left occupying a large salient projecting towards the east, with the Vitebsk salient on its northeast side. The careful evaluation of both *Kutuzov* and the Smolensk Operation by *Stavka* suggested that the losses suffered in both operations were due to poor planning and execution, rather than the inherent strength of German defences; therefore, a new attack in the same region would not necessarily run out of impetus so rapidly, or result in so many casualties.

When thoughts in *Stavka* turned to operations for the summer, the large salient held by Army Group Centre became the focus of attention. Further large-scale operations in the north were unlikely to prove decisive, and the pursuit of the defeated Germans out of Ukraine and towards the Carpathians raised the prospect of difficult offensive operations through the mountain chain. Konev's failed attacks around Târgu Frumos and Iaşi suggested that, despite the successful defence against Wöhler's operations *Katja* and *Sonja*, any attempt to advance in this sector would also be very difficult, as would any major assault across the lower Dniester. Nevertheless, Zhukov suggested the option of an attack towards the west with 1st Ukrainian Front, staying north of the Carpathians, with the intention of capturing Lviv, but such an advance risked leaving its southern flank exposed to a German counteroffensive from the Carpathians and from the north by the German Army Group Centre.

General Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovsky, commander of 1st Belarusian Front, proposed an operation immediately to the north of Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front. Reinforced by two tank armies, the southern wing of his front would strike towards the west. After reaching the Western Bug River, his forces would turn north and drive into the southern flank of the German Army Group Centre, advancing through Brest. At the same time, the northern wing of 1st Belarusian Front would attack towards Minsk from the southeast. This operation would involve an advance through the difficult terrain of the Pripet Marshes, and there was a strong likelihood that, like Zhukov's proposal, this attack risked exposing its flanks to German counterattacks.

By contrast, concentric attacks on the German Army Group Centre salient offered the possibility of several encirclement operations, which would inflict major losses on the Germans and potentially open an irreparable breach in the front line. Furthermore, such an operation in conjunction with a drive towards Lviv offered further benefits. The Red Army had become very adept at sequencing its attacks, so it could expect that the pressure upon Army Group Centre would rapidly draw in all available German reserves. If Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front attacked shortly after operations against Army Group Centre had begun, there was far less likelihood of the Germans being able to concentrate sufficient forces to counterattack either of the flanks of the thrust towards Lviv. Of all the proposals, this seemed to promise the highest likelihood of success and carried the lowest risk.

The outcome of the attempt to penetrate into Romania was a disappointment for the Red Army, but the southern sector remained an area of interest to both sides. Both the Soviet and German high commands recognised that 1943 had been dominated by Soviet attempts to destroy Army Group South and that its seam with Army Group Centre had been ruptured; even during the spring pause, it was possible only to deploy a thin line of outposts and patrols to cover this gap. The Germans remained concerned that a major Soviet attack through what had once been the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia would allow the Red Army to reach the Vistula River and potentially turn north into the rear of Army Group Centre, and reinforcing this concern rapidly became a major part of Soviet planning. Measures would be taken to convince the Germans that the Soviet summer offensive would be a resumption of attacks in the south, rather than an assault on Army Group Centre. The Red Army was unlikely to be able to hide its preparations for either the attack on Army Group Centre or towards Lviv, but by persuading the Germans that the latter was the primary operation, it was hoped that the main assault would get off to a good start before Konev attacked.

The decision to attack Army Group Centre was made in April 1944, before the end of operations in Romania, and the new operation was codenamed *Bagration*. Sequencing of operations was an important part of the planning, and Zhukov proposed starting with an attack in the far north in early June. The main offensive against Army Group Centre would then commence about two weeks later, followed by Konev's attack towards Lviv in mid-July. Finally, there would be a resumption of attacks against Iaşi and Kishinev in August in the expectation that the Wehrmacht would have been forced to divert units from the southern sector to other crises.

Extensive steps were taken to disguise the preparations. Much has been written about *Maskirovka*, or the art of deception practised by the Red Army during the Second World War.[4] It was defined by the Red Army as:

> … the means of securing combat operations and the daily activity of forces; a complexity of measures, directed to mislead the enemy regarding the presence and disposition of forces, various military objectives, their condition, combat readiness and operations, and also the plans of the command.[5]

Maskirovka was practised at every level – strategic, operational and tactical. Staff officers at Front and army level formed small teams to oversee the manner in which deception was used. Through intelligence from prisoner interrogations and a spy network that extended to the upper echelons of German military command, the Red Army had a good understanding of how much the Germans had learned about previous Soviet operations, and an appropriate amount of attention was given to ensuring that plans were kept as secret as possible, in addition to persuading the Germans that the main effort would fall elsewhere. The number of officers who knew about the plans for *Bagration* was kept to the essential minimum. Orders were frequently given orally rather than in writing or by telephone or radio, and were distributed as late as possible, and every effort was made to prevent civilians from moving through important assembly areas. Similar 'quarantine zones' were also created around false assembly areas, to create the illusion that these were actually the locations of new troop concentrations. Aerial reconnaissance was reduced to a minimum so that the Germans wouldn't be alerted by the presence of increased numbers of aircraft, and to avoid airmen who were shot down from revealing increased interest in key bridges and other objectives. Following the repeated success of German radio interception services, radio communications were curtailed to a greater degree than before. All movement to concentration areas was to be carried out at night, with units making maximum use of camouflage to avoid detection; the staff officers responsible for *Maskirovka* often flew over these areas to assess how effective the camouflage was. Air defences in these areas were also strengthened in an attempt to destroy German reconnaissance aircraft.

The Soviet forces in Army Group Centre were ordered to prepare extensive defensive positions as a further step towards misleading the Germans, as Shtemenko later wrote:

> In preparing the Belarusian Operation [*Bagration*], *Stavka* wanted somehow to convince the German high command that the Soviet Army's main attacks in the

> summer of 1944 would be launched in the south and in the Baltic area. On 3 May, the commander of 3rd Ukrainian Front received the following instruction:
>
> 'In order to mislead the enemy it will be your task to carry out certain operational deceptive measures. A concentration of eight or nine infantry divisions supported by tanks and artillery must be displayed beyond the right flank of the Front … The deception area of concentration should be made lifelike by revealing the movements and disposition of various groups of men, machines, tanks, guns and equipment; anti-aircraft guns must be mounted where dummy tanks and artillery are displayed, and the whole area must be shown to have anti-aircraft defences by the mounting of anti-aircraft guns and maintenance of regular fighter patrols.
>
> 'The visibility and effectiveness of deception devices shall be checked by aerial observation and photography … Operation deception display will be put into effect from 5 to 15 June this year.'
>
> A similar directive was sent out to 3rd Baltic Front. Its deception display was to be mounted east of the River Cherekha.
>
> … Leaving our tank armies on the southwest sector was also a kind of bluff. Enemy reconnaissance was keeping a very close eye on them and, since neither of these armies had moved, it reached the conclusion that our offensive was most likely to be launched there.[6]

Maskirovka thus required the Germans to be convinced that the main Soviet effort would be made in a different location, as well as concealing as much as possible the build-up of forces in the real location. Trains transported troops towards the front line facing the German Army Group North Ukraine during the day in order to give the impression of a major concentration in this region, and the men would then be withdrawn by night, often to be sent back aboard another train the following day, as a battalion commander later recalled:

> The troops would be moved out during the night, and then to give the impression that ten divisions had built up, our division would actually have moved backwards and forwards ten times. We'd move out at night, come back in the morning, sleep the whole day, and then repeat it all over again.[7]

Dummy equipment was manufactured and then elaborately protected from air attack to further the illusion. Finally, reconnaissance in force was carried out at multiple locations to prevent the Germans from interpreting such activity as a sign of an imminent attack. The measures were largely effective as General Kurt von Tippelskirch, commander of the German Fourth Army, later wrote:

> There was no information that would allow us to predict confidently the axes of the forthcoming Russian summer offensive. As aviation and signals intelligence always detected large transfers of Russian forces, one could believe that they were not yet directly threatening an attack. To date, the only intensive rail transport for several weeks in the enemy's rear area was towards the Lutsk, Kovel and Sarny sectors, but this was not followed by the concentration of new forces near the front line. We had to be guided by guesswork. *OKH* considered the possibility of a repeat offensive against Kovel, believing that the enemy would concentrate his main effort north of the Carpathians on the front of Army Group North Ukraine in order to drive it back to the Carpathians. Army Groups Centre and North predicted a 'calm summer'. In addition, Hitler was particularly concerned about the Ploesti oil region. With regard to the enemy's first attack being to the north or south of the Carpathians – most likely to the north – the view was unanimous.[8]

In other words: the Soviet planners successfully reinforced German suspicions that the blow would fall on Army Group North Ukraine. When troop concentrations were detected in Army Group Centre's sector, these were interpreted as Soviet attempts to mislead the Germans about their intentions. Nevertheless, there was a sober awareness that even such distractions amounted to considerable resources that would probably be used in local attacks, and on 10 June the *OKH* assessment stressed the threats that these might pose:

> Whilst it is still considered that the attack on Army Group Centre will be a secondary operation within the overall framework of Soviet offensive operations, it must be taken into account that the enemy in front of Army Group Centre will be able to build concentrations which, in view of the ratio of forces between the two sides, will be able to achieve penetrative force that should not be underestimated.[9]

Whilst the intention was to give the Germans the impression that the summer offensive would be carried out in the southern sector, even here there were attempts to mislead and misinform. Konev, now in command of 1st Ukrainian

Front, was planning his offensive towards Lviv, and took steps to hide his true intentions:

> To conceal the preparations for the operation, Front headquarters developed a detailed operational plan for *Maskirovka*, intended to simulate the concentration of two tank armies and independent tank corps on the Front's left wing, in the sectors of First Guards Army and Eighteenth Army. To implement this, we faked the movement of tanks by rail on a large scale, including the detraining of tank formations, their movement to concentration areas, and the use of open radio transmission. In the false concentration areas, large numbers of various types of tanks, vehicles, guns and other equipment were displayed.
>
> This plan, developed in detail by the head of my engineering troops, Lieutenant General [Ivan Pavlovich] Galitsky, working with Front headquarters … was rigorously implemented. Appropriate measures were taken to conceal the real regrouping of troops. All movements of formations were carried out only at night with the strictest camouflage discipline.
>
> And yet, unfortunately, we did not succeed in completely deceiving the enemy, despite the measures we took. However, the regrouping of First Guards Tank Army in the region south of Lutsk and Fourth Tank Army in the Tarnopol area remained a secret, which was most important for the operation.[10]

It seems that Galitsky's *Maskirovka* plan included a fundamental flaw. Whilst combat units seem to have adhered to instructions regarding camouflage, rear area units were either not instructed to show the same discipline, or ignored their orders. The movement of supply columns, repair workshops, etc. gave the Germans a clear idea of where Konev's offensive would occur. Ironically, this actually helped the overall Soviet *Maskirovka* plan, in that by determining 1st Ukrainian Front's hidden intentions, the Wehrmacht believed that it had identified the likely main axis for the summer offensive.

There is another aspect to *Maskirovka*. Like all those involved in the Second World War, the Soviet Union attempted to portray its performance in the best possible manner. Events were therefore sometimes described after the war in a manner to give potential enemies a mistaken impression of events, to create a narrative of masterful planning and deception. As the Cold War developed after 1945 and memoirs of German and Soviet commanders began to be published, it became standard Soviet doctrine to portray the attempts by Konev and Malinovsky to attack in May 1944 as parts of the *Maskirovka* operation. There can be no doubt that the attacks at Târgu Frumos and Iaşi encouraged the

Germans to believe that another effort here was highly likely, but equally there can be no doubt that the Red Army's intention had genuinely been to try to break into Romania. Whether this intention amounted to a plan for a full invasion of Romania, or whether it was an attempt to inflict one more defeat on the exhausted units of the former Army Group South, is open to debate. In a similar manner, the failed attempts by the Red Army to overwhelm the German salient at Rzhev in late 1942 – through a series of attacks codenamed *Mars* – were for many years portrayed as a skilful ruse to divert German attention from the coming encirclement of the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad. It is only comparatively recently that it has become clear that huge resources were committed to – and squandered in – *Mars*.

The first week of June brought long-awaited but unwelcome developments for Germany. On 4 June, Rome fell to the Western Allies, and on 6 June, Operation *Overlord* saw troops coming ashore in Normandy. The fear of a two-front war was now a reality, and there were almost no reserves available. Hitler's intention to crush the Western Allies before they could break out of their beachhead never showed any likelihood of success, not least because of the need to send equipment to the east to rebuild the divisions mauled in the previous winter's fighting. At the same time, preparations continued for the Red Army's summer offensives. In Army Group North Ukraine's sector, the Germans continued to believe that the main assault would fall in their area, and there had been further command changes during the pause in fighting. Raus moved from command of Fourth Panzer Army to take command of First Panzer Army; his predecessor, Kurt von der Chevallerie, spent a brief period in reserve before being sent to take command of the German First Army in France. Raus' replacement at Fourth Panzer Army was, temporarily, General Walter Nehring, but he was forced by illness to leave the front and Generaloberst Josef Harpe took command in May. He was an experienced Eastern Front commander, having led Ninth Army in Army Group Centre during the winter of 1943–1944, and in the third week of June he had his first test in his new command. The opposing Soviet forces were from Rokossovsky's 1st Belarusian Front and Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front, and shelling and probing attacks began to flare up around the city of Kovel, the scene of bitter fighting earlier in the year. The city was now in an exposed salient projecting towards the east and Harpe requested permission for its abandonment; somewhat surprisingly, Hitler agreed.

The withdrawal from Kovel was a complex affair. Considerable stockpiles of supplies had been built up in the city and Harpe ordered their withdrawal by rail to the west. This took much of June to be completed, and on 22 June – the anniversary of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union – *Bagration* began. Within days, large elements of Army Group Centre were encircled or in full retreat. At this stage, the attempts to mislead the Germans into believing that the summer campaign would be against Army Group North Ukraine went into reverse – it was now of greater value if the Germans believed that this sector would remain quiet. Although the Wehrmacht detected unmistakable signs of Soviet preparations, the disaster that unfolded in Army Group Centre required the urgent transfer of troops away from Army Group North Ukraine, and in the four weeks following 10 June, the Germans transferred six panzer and panzergrenadier divisions to the north.[11]

Once the evacuation of the supply dumps in Kovel was complete, it was time for Fourth Panzer Army's front line to pull back to a new defensive line further to the west. With the growing disaster in Army Group Centre's sector, there were further command changes. Model was moved from command of Army Group North Ukraine to Army Group Centre, and was replaced by Harpe; his replacement at Fourth Panzer Army was Nehring, who now oversaw the abandonment of Kovel. The first stage of the operation, codenamed *Erdbeere* ('*Strawberry*'), commenced late on 4 July with German infantry east of Kovel breaking contact with the opposing Soviet units and pulling back through the city. The withdrawal seems to have caught the Red Army by surprise, and pursuit was slow to begin. However, sharp attacks followed, threatening to turn the northern flank of the German LVI Panzer Corps, and Fourth Panzer Army had its hands full fending off these attacks and establishing a defensible line.

Throughout this period, Konev continued his preparations for his coming attack towards Lviv. He described the extensive activity of his engineers, which must have been almost impossible to conceal:

> Between 1 May and 10 July, the Front's engineering teams built, restored or repaired 3,300km of roads, and built or repaired 360 bridges with a collective length of over 5,300m. The largest bridges with a capacity of 30–60 tons were built over the Dniester, Zbruch, Prut and Seret. During the preparations, they constructed 2,241km of trenches, 679km of communications lines, 22,000 machine-gun nests, 1,426 bunkers, 5,776 artillery emplacements, 5,600 mortar emplacements, 5,497 command or observation posts, and 22,992 shelters and dugouts.[12]

Perhaps drawing on his experiences earlier in the year, Konev took steps to try to prevent the supply shortages that had repeatedly held up operations. Units were given sufficient food for at least 20 days, and refuelling stocks were built up to allow for up to four replenishments of each vehicle. Ammunition stocks were also built up to provide at least three replenishments, with half of that stock being held by the front-line units. He later wrote that 'it was planned' to create a reserve stockpile of 3,000 tons of fuel, but doesn't comment on whether these plans were actually realised. He used his overall artillery superiority to good effect by concentrating firepower where he planned to attack, with a density of over 250 barrels per kilometre; this concentration was necessary, Konev felt, because of the extensive field fortifications that the Germans had constructed. It was also perhaps a recognition that the infantry units of his army were of poorer quality than before, and would require a compensatory increase in heavy fire support. Units were brought up to strength with reinforcements, though many of these were men from the recently liberated areas west of the Dnepr. These men lacked the training of previous drafts, but in an attempt to alleviate the impact of this, front-line units created assault formations around experienced officers and men and provided them with intensive training. One of the more striking comments in Konev's account about preparations is the manner in which the use of air power was to be controlled:

> It was ordered that the command and observation posts of aviation commanders were to be in the same location as the command and obvservation posts of combined-arms and tank commanders, or in their immediate vicinity. Consequently, the commander of Second Air Army was at the observation post of the Front commander, and commanders of air corps were at the observation posts of army commanders.[13]

Whilst the Soviet forces had used considerable air assets repeatedly, the coordination of their attacks with ground forces was not at the same level as the manner in which the Germans operated. Whilst both sides used pre-planned air attacks before and during operations, it was normal practice for German units to be assigned *Fliegerverbindungsoffiziere* ('air liaison officers', often abbreviated to *Flivo*) who could call in air strikes at short notice. The Soviet forces rarely had such flexibility in their use of air power, and Konev's instructions seem to have been a belated attempt to improve matters.

The northern attack would commence a little to the south of Kovel and drive southwest towards Rava-Ruska, and would be led by Third Guards Army and Thirteenth Army, with First Guards Tank Army ready to be deployed once a breakthrough had been established. The southern attack would be made from directly east of Lviv and would see Sixtieth and Thirty-Eighth Armies breaking the German defences, after which Third Guards Tank Army and Fourth Tank Army would be committed. The two thrusts were to converge and isolate the German forces between them before driving on to Lviv and thence onwards to the west. Given the degree to which his forces outnumbered the Germans, Konev was highly confident that he would swiftly overwhelm the German defences and would be able to push on to the Vistula and seize crossings over the river, thus threatening a thrust into the centre of Poland.

The intended pace of operations was, as was usually the case with Soviet planning, fairly ambitious. Konev expected First Guards Tank Army to be deployed on the first day after Third and Thirteenth Armies had achieved an initial breakthrough; by the end of the first day, its leading elements were to advance about 24 miles (40km) to secure crossings over the Western Bug. By the fourth day of operations, First Guards Army was to take Rava-Ruska. As had been the case during Malinovsky's advance to the Dniester, a Horse and Mechanised Group was created consisting of I Guards Cavalry Corps and XXV Tank Corps under the command of Lieutenant General Viktor Kirillovich Baranov, and was tasked with covering the northern flank of the advance, while Third Guards Tank Army was to attack after Sixtieth Army secured a breakthrough further south, advancing 18 miles (30km) on the first day of the operation and a similar distance on the second day, with the intention of encircling Lviv from the north and northwest. Fourth Tank Army would attack with Thirty-Eighth Army and would keep up a similar pace, enveloping Lviv from the south, and a second Horse and Mechanised Group, consisting of VI Guards Cavalry Corps and XXXI Tank Corps under the command of Lieutenant General Sergei Vladimirovich Sokolov, would operate between Third Guards Tank Army and Fourth Tank Army.[14] *Stavka* raised doubts about this plan, ordering Konev not to use his tank forces to help the infantry to achieve the initial breakthrough and to delay their deployment until the second day of operations at the earliest – otherwise, there was a high likelihood that they would be forced to operate with little room to manoeuvre and would suffer avoidable losses while they fought their way through the German defences.

There was also disagreement about one of the main features of Konev's plan, namely the intention to attack on two axes, and Stalin suggested a single direct thrust towards Lviv might be more effective:

> Clearly, the execution of two thrusts created certain difficulties and demanded great efforts both from the command [of the Front] and the troops. This form of

> operational manoeuvre could only be carried out if there were sufficient troops and materiel at the Front's disposal …
>
> The decision to deliver two thrusts was quite expedient and, I suggest, necessary. But Stalin insisted on his own plan. I defended our point of view, arguing that a single thrust on the Lviv axis would give the enemy the opportunity to manoeuvre freely with his panzer and panzergrenadier divisions and other reserves, as well as allowing him to concentrate his air power against our forces. In addition, an assault by a single shock group of the Front on the Lviv axis would force our troops to overcome a number of strong defensive lines along high ground, and to storm powerful strongholds of a fairly dense German defence system. This would not lead to a breakthrough but to a gnawing into the defences, pushing the enemy from one line to the next and would not give great operational benefits. One thrust in these particular conditions could not lead to a high rate of advance and, therefore, did not bode well.
>
> My arguments and perseverance compelled Stalin finally to agree with our plan. I remember how he said, 'You are very stubborn. Very well, carry out your plan and execute it on your responsibility.' Such a comment was noteworthy. I realised that this was a clear warning of responsibility for the possible outcome of the operation.
>
> Frankly, it wasn't stubbornness on this occasion but self-belief. I had been entrusted with the Front, numbering more than a million human lives, and I was responsible not only for fulfilling the plan of the forthcoming operation but also for the lives of the people I sent into battle.[15]

There has been a widespread point of view in the western world since the end of the Second World War that the Red Army prevailed over the Wehrmacht by sheer weight of numbers. Whilst there is some value in this argument, it fails to take account of the manner in which the Red Army evolved and continued to refine itself. At every level, steps were taken to improve the efficacy of combat formations. Colonel Vasily Ivanovich Zaitsev was a brigade commander in Dmitri Danilovich Lelyushenko's Fourth Tank Army:

> Special attention was given to training units in night-fighting. Our commander, Colonel-General Lelyushenko, demanded this, and often visited the brigade. Every time, he personally drew the movement route for one of the tank companies on a map and monitored the ability of the tank crews to navigate in darkness in unfamiliar territory, and checked that commanders were able to manage their subordinates at night. He also constantly checked the state of weaponry training

> of the tank crews, demanding that they hit targets at long range with either their first or second shot. In an old quarry, the tankers fired on the newest captured tanks and assault guns with the new 85mm gun …
>
> On 26 June, following the orders of the corps commander, the brigade … concentrated in a forest 1km west of Stikhynovitsa. For training purposes, the battalion of submachine-gunners was ordered by the company commander to make the 200km march on foot, simultaneously taking part in practical training such as forcing a water obstacle, pursuit of a retreating enemy, and street fighting in a large village.[16]

The Germans had done what they could, shortening their line where possible in order to try to release local reserves, and as Konev's reconnaissance had shown, they had taken extensive measures to fortify their positions. The northern formation of First Panzer Army, at the seam with Fourth Panzer Army, was XIII Corps and in keeping with the tactics outlined by Raus, the foremost line was not fully manned:

> The formations of XIII Corps had each battalion put only two companies in the first trench, [and] the third company stayed back in the second trench. Heavy infantry weapons were echeloned in depth to spare them from the enemy drumfire on the main line of resistance and, at the same time, to provide a greater depth to the main defensive area. The formations established a closed *Pakfront* and behind that, all of the artillery in positions organised for all-round defence set up for seamless anti-tank defence. The anti-aircraft pieces were distributed among the artillery positions for defence against the increasingly frequent ground attack aircraft strikes on artillery positions. Furthermore, the formations prepared, at short notice, to provide one regiment each and one artillery battalion each to XIII Corps for despatch to another sector. Appropriate instructions for taking over sectors in such cases were already in force within the divisions. *Korpsabteilung C* had pulled its command posts, its field replacement battalion [made up of recently arrived drafts], its 217th Battalion, and its [rear area] elements out of the built-up areas and relocated them in the woods in anticipation of air attacks. In addition, precautions had been taken against disruption of communications by bombing or artillery fire, alternative supply routes had been reconnoitred and assembly areas secured for the removal of civilans.[17]

Similarly, LVI Panzer Corps, on the northern flank of Fourth Panzer Army, improvised what reserves it could. A battalion from 253rd Infantry Division was combined with a company from an anti-tank battalion and an assault gun battery to create an ad hoc battlegroup, and another such group was formed with a battalion from 1st *Ski-Jäger* Division, reinforced with another assault gun battery. Both battlegroups were positioned immediately behind the front line on the expected axis of the Soviet attack; compared to the resources available to Konev, these small groups of perhaps 400 riflemen with a dozen armoured vehicles could not be expected to achieve much. And regardless of such local measures, the lack of operational reserves and the all-consuming crisis enveloping Army Group Centre ensured that, if the Red Army were to achieve a major breakthrough, there was no prospect of the situation being restored by the arrival of fresh reinforcements. Everything would depend upon the troops in the front line when 1st Ukrainian Front attacked.

CHAPTER 12

THE LVIV-SANDOMIERZ OPERATION

The city now known as Lviv had many names during the 20th century. For most of the first two decades, it was known as Lemberg, and was one of the most important cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, second only to Vienna, Budapest and Prague. At the end of the First World War, its explosive mixture of Polish and Ukrainian residents resulted in immediate conflict when a group of Ukrainians attempted to seize the city. Polish residents immediately staged an uprising and the Ukrainian forces in the city were too weak to keep control; the Poles swiftly seized the city centre, and then found themselves besieged by Ukrainian forces hurrying to the aid of their compatriots who had initially tried to take control. The Inter-Allied Commission in Paris proposed that the city should be under Polish administration pending a referendum, but Polish troops arrived in the region before the end of 1918, driving away the Ukrainian paramilitary units in the area. Immediately, there was a wave of violence against Ukrainians and Jews in the city; the latter had remained largely neutral throughout, but this didn't protect them from the violence that followed, with over 300 killed. All Ukrainian institutions were swiftly suppressed and the city was given the Polish name of Lwów. The population remained very mixed, with a census in 1931 showing that – based upon their preferred first language – there were about 198,000 Poles in Lwów, 75,000 Jews, 35,000 Ukrainians, and perhaps 4,000 others. The city was captured by the Germans in 1939 and then handed over to the Soviet Union, and became known as Lvov. During this period, Jewish refugees from elsewhere increased the Jewish population to over

200,000, and the proximity of the city to the demarcation line between Germany and the Soviet Union meant that the city rapidly fell to the advancing Wehrmacht in 1941, whereupon it was once more renamed Lemberg by the new occupying powers. Only a small proportion of the city's Jews were able to leave before the arrival of the Germans.

Prior to their departure from the city, NKVD personnel carried out about 8,000 executions of prisoners held in two prisons. Encouraged by the Germans, the Ukrainians in the city used this as a pretext for a pogrom against the Jews, on the grounds that many of the NKVD personnel were Jewish, ignoring the fact that many of the victims of the NKVD were also Jews. Over 4,000 Jews were killed in the pogrom, and a second outbreak of violence a few days later led to another 2,000 deaths. The surviving Jews, numbering perhaps 120,000, were confined to a ghetto, from where most were ultimately transported to the concentration camp at Bełzec, where they were killed. Others were executed in mass killings nearer to the city. Whilst many Ukrainians willingly took part in the killing of Jews, others took great risks to save their former neighbours. In the small town of Zółkiew (now Zhovka) to the north of Lviv, one such resident's efforts were still visible decades later, when the son of Jews from the region returned to the area:

> Nearby [our guide] pointed to another house, which we should visit. She knocked vigorously on the front door, eventually opened by the owner, a round and jolly man with a big smile. Come in, he said, before leading us to the front bedroom, overlooking the wooden church, then to a small area between bed and wall. On his knees, he prised up a section of the parquet, revealing an irregular hole in the floor, just large enough for an adult to pass. In this space, in the darkness, Clara Kramer [a local Jewish girl] and seventeen other Jews hid for nearly two years.[1]

As the Red Army once more approached the city in 1944, local tensions between Poles and Ukrainians began to increase once more. An added nuance was that, in addition to armed groups supporting Polish and Ukrainian interests, there were also pro-Soviet partisans operating in the area. Lelyushenko, commander of Fourth Tank Army, wrote his memoirs in the orthodox manner of the Soviet era, and mentioned preparations for operating in this region:

> After the liberation of Lviv and other Soviet cities, we were to liberate fraternal Poland. We were firmly convinced that the workers of the Polish state would

> welcome the Red Army as their liberator and helper. But we did not rule out the possibility of hostile actions on the part of bourgeois nationalist elements led by the emigrant government in London. The henchmen of [Stanisłav] Mikołajczyk [the Polish prime minister in exile] would cooperate with us only on those occasions when it suited their bourgeois purposes.
>
> In these circumstances, we had the task of additional training for the soldiers in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, and about respecting the national traditions of the Polish people and providing them with every possible help in expelling the enemy. Iron military discipline and revolutionary vigilance amongst the troops were steadily strengthened.
>
> A lot of work was done in this respect by the army political department, headed by [Colonel Nikolai Grigorovich] Kladovoi, and the political sections and commissars and commanders of all units. They conducted discussions and lectures, and organised political classes on the themes 'The great liberation mission of the Red Army', 'Workers of Poland – our friends and brothers', and 'History of the Polish state, its economy and culture'. The army and corps newspapers, and leaflets in each unit also covered these issues and in every possible way contributed to the further growth of political consciousness, and increased the combat skills, of the soldiers.[2]

It should be remembered that, prior to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 that effectively carved up Poland between the Soviet Union and Germany, Lviv was an integral part of Poland, and not a 'Soviet city' as Lelyushenko implies here. Nor is it credible that Poland – which fought a war against Bolshevik Russia immediately after the First World War, and then suffered the invasion of its eastern regions by the Red Army in 1939 – could be regarded as a 'fraternal' friend of the Soviet Union. Throughout this narrative, the modern Ukrainian name of Lviv is used.

The region already held by the Red Army remained restless. Groups of Ukrainian nationalists like those who had killed Vatutin were active in the area and many Soviet soldiers waiting for the offensive had to remain watchful in case of attacks by the nationalist partisans. Evgenii Dmitrievich Monyushko was a junior officer in an artillery regiment near Tarnopol:

> The Tarnopol region was one of several hotbeds for Banderite activity, and therefore the UPROS [*Uchebnyy Polk Rezerva Ofitserskogo Sostava* or 'Training Regiment of Reserve Artillery Officers'] camp had to be vigilantly guarded. Half of the personnel were doing guard duty and the other half preparing to replace

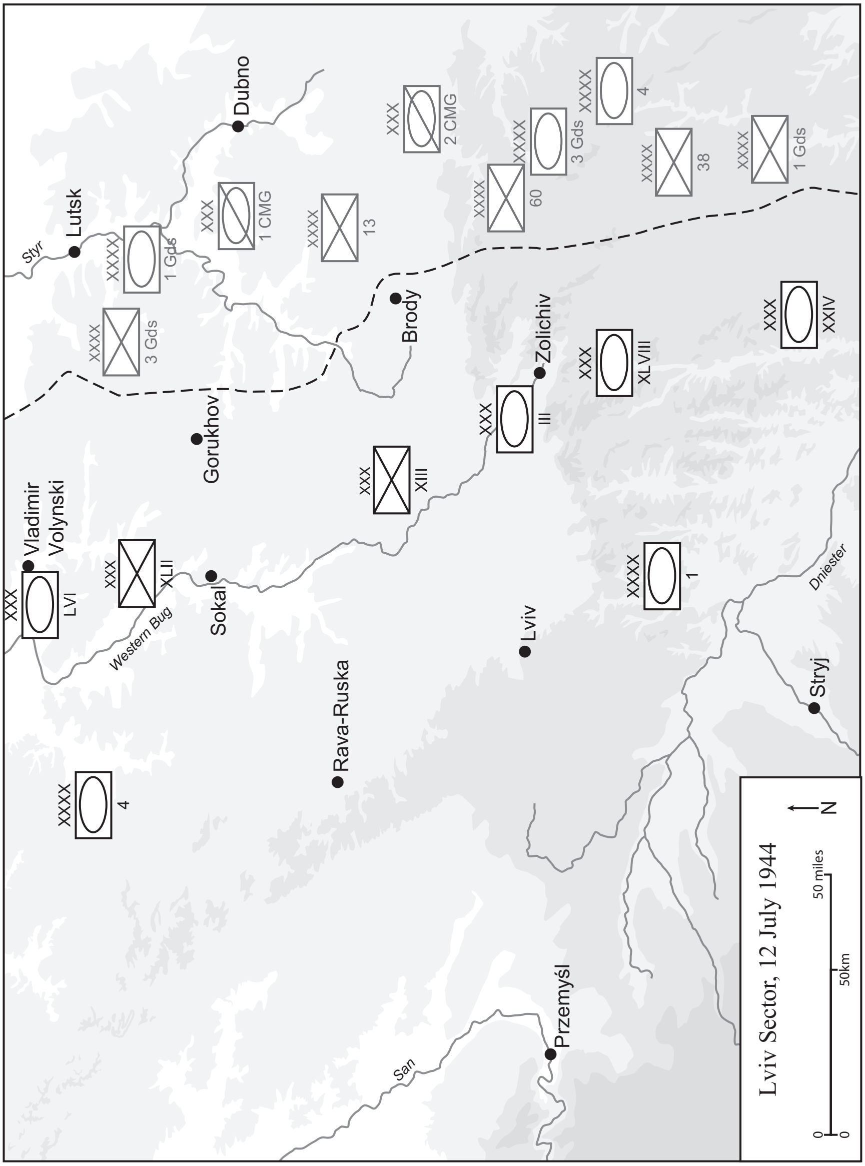
> them at the guard posts. During the night, hidden outposts were also deployed in addition to the regular posts and patrols. Their locations were changed every day. People left for them after dark so that hostile observers couldn't see their location. The mission of the outposts was to prevent night attacks against the permanent guard posts.
>
> Twice, the regiment was alerted and using some of the training weapons we went out on raids, combing the local villages, and there were unavoidable firefights and we captured several suspicious individuals who turned out to be Banderites.[3]

Regardless of the orthodox view of Lelyushenko and others that the local civilians welcomed the Red Army as liberators, Monyushko noted the dangers of the locality:

> The non-permanent personnel of the regiment [i.e. the trainee officers] were not issued firearms. But the officers lived in tents that were different from those used by the rest of the army, and in these there were always several rifles, and many people had pockets filled with ammunition. In addition, some officers carried undocumented captured weapons. The commanders disapproved of this out of concern for some sort of accident, but didn't oppose it either due to the restless Banderite region where the regiment was deployed … When I received my assignment [to a front line unit], two other officers gladly accompanied me. It seemed easier and safer to travel through the restless Western Ukraine and Poland in a group, with at least one handgun between the three of us.[4]

The German troops that pulled back from Kovel consisted of 26th, 253rd and 342nd Infantry Divisions with 1st *Ski-Jäger* Division on the southern flank. After a slightly tardy start, the adjoining flanks of 1st Ukrainian Front and 1st Belarusian Front began to advance and applied increasing pressure. At the northern end of the German line, contact with 26th Infantry Division was rapidly lost as it fell back in increasing disarray, but local counterattacks managed to bring the retreat to a halt and generally stabilised the front line, just as fighting flared further south as Konev unleashed his assault.

The steps taken by Raus to avoid having his troops caught by Soviet bombardments have already been described, and variations of this policy were rapidly adopted elsewhere along the Eastern Front. Inevitably, the Red Army



Lviv Sector, 12 July 1944

Dubno
Lutsk
Styr
Brody
Zolichiv
Gorukhov
Vladimir Volynski
Sokal
Western Bug
Rava-Ruska
Lviv
Przemyśl
San
Stryj
Dniester
XXX 2 CMG
XXXX 4
XXXX 3 Gds
XXXX 1 Gds
XXXX 38
XXXX 60
XXX 1 CMG
XXXX 13
XXXX 1 Gds
XXXX 3 Gds
XXX XXIV
XXX XLVIII
XXX III
XXX XIII
XXX XLII
XXX LVI
XXXX 1
XXXX 4
0 50km
0 50 miles
N

became aware of this and took its own measures to neutralise the new German tactics, as Konev recounted:

> From experience in previous operations, we took into account that the enemy repeatedly tried to deceive us by withdrawing his troops from the first line of defence to the second line in order to protect them from the weight of our artillery bombardment and to thwart our attack. Taking this into account, it was decided to conduct reconnaissance late on 12 July, and to begin action with the leading battalions the following dawn.
>
> And in fact intelligence established that on the night of 12–13 July, under the cover of a rearguard, the Nazis began to move their main forces to the second defensive line in the Rava-Ruska sector. To take advantage of this favourable intelligence, we decided to launch the attack by the main forces of Third Guards Army and Thirteenth Army without artillery preparation, supporting them with aviation assets.[5]

These early explorations of the German defences were company- and battalion-sized reconnaissance probes during the night of 12–13 July. When these confirmed the German withdrawal from positions in front of Third Guards Army and Thirteenth Army, Konev ordered an immediate advance and shortly after dawn the leading elements reported that they had progressed through the depth of the German defences. The first major resistance occurred at the small town of Gorukhov during the afternoon, but the German defences were overrun after being outflanked to north and south. Soviet aircraft attacked the German positions in depth, disrupting the movement of ammunition columns, with the result that German artillery soon became short of ammunition, and the advancing Soviet units began to drive back the southern flank of the German XLII Corps, where 340th Infantry Division was rapidly isolated. The neighbouring Soviet Thirteenth Army had a harder day and pushed forward no more than three or four miles into the German positions. Nevertheless, the northern assault by 1st Ukrainian Front was off to a good start.

The leading units of Sixtieth and Thirty-Eighth Armies, which were to secure the southern breakthrough, fared far worse. This sector was defended by First Panzer Army with XIII Corps in the north and XLVIII Panzer Corps to its south. The in-depth defences of the Germans resulted in bitter fighting when the reconnaissance in force began. However, given that there was clear evidence of the Germans pulling back in front of the northern attack, Konev ordered the offensive to begin on 14 July after a 30-minute artillery preparation. The ground in front of the German defences was relatively open and Konev had intended the initial attack to be made before dawn, but it proved impossible to get all of the assault troops into position in time. When they advanced through heavy rain, the Soviet troops came under heavy German artillery and machine-gun fire and found the German defences were still largely intact; it took until early afternoon for the attackers to fight their way through the first two lines of trenches. Rather than continue throwing troops forward, the Soviet commanders paused to await better weather. During the afternoon, the weather improved allowing Soviet aircraft to provide support. After a further heavy artillery bombardment, the Soviet troops tried again, and in places managed to push forward about two miles, albeit at the price of heavy losses. The local reserves that *Korps Abteilung C* had created proved to be very effective in mounting stinging counterattacks on the Soviet units, but by the end of the day these reserves were all fully committed.

When this operation was analysed at a later date, the preparations and reconnaissance carried out by Colonel General Kirill Semenovich Moskalenko's Thirty-Eighth Army were extensively criticised. In his memoirs, Moskalenko offered a defence:

> I remain certain that the result of the first day of the offensive might have been more significant if we had not waited for the weather to improve and allow air attacks, and had brought the entire first echelon of divisions into action as soon as the leading battalions had gained the enemy's second trench. The situation was really not entirely clear, but had we taken decisive action, it would have become clearer.
>
> What prevented me from acting energetically? My situation was complicated by the fact that I personally couldn't take the decision to commit the first echelon into action. The fact is that our right flank attacked adjacent to Sixtieth Army and interacted with it under the direct supervision of the Front commander, who – naturally – couldn't allow isolated actions by one of the two armies advancing on the same axis ...
>
> The well-known axiom that an assault always has a greater impact if supported by bombers and ground attack aircraft prevailed. But in this particular case, as the enemy had become aware of the location of our main effort, which he had long awaited, the delay was unjustified. This demonstrates once more that there are no rules that have no exceptions, no guidelines that prevail on all occasions.
>
> This is all the more relevant to the events described here because even when the weather improved, the hopes of air support were far from fully realised. Most strikes were on targets located further back. The remaining close air support did

> not impact sufficiently on the enemy's main defence zone because he had pulled back from his foremost positions after the successes of our leading battalions.
>
> During the artillery preparation, which lasted 90 minutes, the manpower and weaponry of the enemy on the front line were not completely overwhelmed. His command and communications were disrupted, but only temporarily. The enemy managed to regroup his weapons without our noticing, bringing them forward from further back to strengthen the defences. In short, the efficacy of this artillery preparation cannot compare with that at Kiev or the Zhitomir-Berdichev Operation …
>
> Finally, concerning tanks. The 1st Ukrainian Front had over 2,000 tanks and self-propelled guns. But the bulk of the tanks belonged to the tank armies and tank corps, which were intended to operate in the enemy's operational depth. The infantry's direct support groups were allocated a meagre number of armoured fighting vehicles. Thus, in Thirty-Eighth Army there were only 29 tanks and 45 SU-76 assault guns. They were sufficient only to support the advanced battalions. When the rifle divisions of the first echelon attacked after artillery preparation, it was an infantry attack without sufficient provision of direct infantry support by tanks …
>
> Under such conditions it's difficult to expect great success in modern warfare. And our success on the first day was genuinely insignificant.[6]

Konev offered some support for this, particularly in the use of tanks to aid a breakthrough:

> Even in 1944 there were some commanders who considered it possible in the field to achieve a breakthrough of the enemy's defences purely using rifle troops, i.e. with the bayonet, machine-gun, and artillery, and to use tanks only after a breakthrough. Well, if infantry in such an attack were supported by sufficient tanks, then you could count on success. But often there were too few to provide support. In these cases, it wasn't a breakthrough that was achieved, rather a gnawing into the defences, with the infantry suffering heavy losses while tank armies waited to the rear for the breakthrough.
>
> Participants in warfare know that during an attack, as soon as machine-gun fire starts, the infantry take cover. And if an armoured unit moves out to meet them, they stop the attack for a prolonged period. Our infantry would wait for our artillery or tanks to engage and suppress this enemy armour or sometimes even machine-guns.
>
> But for tanks operating with infantry, machine-guns are not an obstacle, and enemy armour is also not an obstacle.[7]

Nevertheless, Konev had explicitly avoided deploying any of his tank army subunits in close support to aid the breakthrough operation. In that context, it was perhaps inappropriate for all of the blame for the failures to be assigned to the commanders of the two field armies, and Konev's tacit acknowledgement that his instructions to hold back the armour contributed to the poor level of success is significant.

While Sixtieth and Thirty-Eighth Armies struggled forward, the northern group continued to enjoy success despite the intervention of German armour. In anticipation of a Soviet attack, 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions were behind the front line; badly weakened by earlier fighting, they could only muster 45 tanks between them and their first probing counterattack was easily beaten off by the Soviet forces. However, by the end of 14 July, the Soviet advance had come to a halt in the face of a new line of German defences; sufficient German troops had succeeded in withdrawing from the original front line to man this line effectively, and the Soviet commanders were concerned that a further deliberate attack would be needed to break through rather than attempting to drive off the Germans with an immediate attack by the leading elements of Third Guards Army. Thirteenth Army also encountered growing resistance with elements of the German panzer divisions clashing with its leading elements.

Despite this, the northern penetration began to gather pace on 15 July. Even if the Germans had succeeded in shoring up parts of the front line, others continued to give way, with LVI Panzer Corps continuing to withdraw towards the Western Bug. The breach in the lines of XLII Corps continued to develop despite desperate counterattacks aimed at restoring contact with 340th Infantry Division on the southern flank, and Konev ordered the first of his mobile units, I Guards Cavalry Corps from Baranov's Horse and Mechanised Group, to move forward with the intention of attacking early on 16 July in order to add impetus to the Soviet advance. The southern attack was resumed with greater energy, and was redirected a little further south against XLVIII Panzer Corps. This formation was, as before, under the command of Hermann Balck, and he had considerable resources at his disposal. Immediately behind the infantry divisions holding his sector were 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions, and Raus swiftly released these to Balck's control. He immediately ordered a counterattack by the two units in an attempt to blunt the Soviet advance before it could gather pace; at the same time, 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions were to move forward to deal with the northern Soviet attack. Balck's description of the attack by 8th Panzer Division suggests that the division commander, the recently promoted Generalmajor Werner Friebe, made serious errors:

> The 8th Panzer Division was meant to intercept the enemy's breakthrough north of Zolochiv by moving through woodland to conceal its movements from enemy aircraft. I had ordered the main road [running southeast from Zolochiv] not to be used as it was clear that anything moving on that road would be targeted by Russian aircraft …
>
> Unfortunately, without my knowledge, the commander of 8th Panzer Division decided to advance via Zolochiv on the main road because it would be quicker. And as I had anticipated, the Russian Air Force spotted the division on the road and struck it hard, making it ineffective for combat for two days.[8]

The two panzer divisions had been under the control of Generalleutnant Dietrich von Saucken's III Panzer Corps prior to being assigned to Balck's control, and Balck felt that the failure of 8th Panzer Division to follow his instructions was due to poor command and control arrangements in III Panzer Corps. This judgement was clearly not shared by higher commands; Saucken was moved from command of this corps – which now had no significant units at its disposal – and sent to take command of XXXIX Panzer Corps, which was to attempt to intercept the Soviet armoured formations racing west through the wreckage of Army Group Centre as a result of *Bagration*, and if he had been significantly at fault for 8th Panzer Division's mishap, it seems highly unlikely that he would have been given this command. Friebe, on the other hand, was replaced by Balck as commander of 8th Panzer Division by Generalmajor Gottfried Frölich on 21 July – Balck removed him from command immediately he learned of the setback, and sent his chief of staff, Oberst Friedrich von Mellenthin, to lead the division until Frölich arrived. Friebe did not hold any front-line posts for the rest of the war. It should also be noted that the infantry divisions that failed to hold back the Soviet attack, thus necessitating intervention by the panzer divisions, were actually part of Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps. If their defences failed more readily than those elsewhere – particularly their northern neighbours, where the initial Soviet thrust had been blocked – this was perhaps at least partly due to inadequate measures being taken to strengthen their positions, and given that Balck regarded Friebe's failure as being partly attributable to failings at III Panzer Corps' headquarters, the failure of his infantry divisions surely reflected on failings in XLVIII Panzer Corps' headquarters. In defence of Friebe, it is quite possible that the route that Balck intended him to use – through woodland – was simply not suitable for armoured vehicles. Raus' memoirs paint a rather different picture than that presented by Balck:

> Shortly before this operation, the commanders of both 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions had assured me that this forest was impenetrable even for Russian armour.[9]

It is also worth noting that Friebe had led the attempts to break through to the besieged garrison in Tarnopol earlier in the year and had fought with distinction. Indeed, he had personal experience of leading battlegroups in the very area where he was now fighting. Balck's summary of Friebe says as much about Balck's vision of himself as it does about Friebe:

> He was an especially good, very smart, well-educated, and highly qualified officer; a shrewd general staff officer; an accomplished panzer leader. He had always received glowing evaluation reports from top panzer commanders; but he nonetheless was a second-rate man. He himself could not be blamed for his misfortune. He was a victim of the flawed selection system within our general staff. Although he was full of personal integrity, he did not have that harmonious union of strengths that Clausewitz wrote about. Intelligence with nothing else to support it is a curse.[10]

It is difficult to follow this argument, that a man who was acknowledged as being especially good and highly qualified, and who had led with distinction and been praised highly, was somehow second-rate purely because of one incident. It also perhaps shows an underlying prejudice against the general staff; Balck had been offered a transfer to the general staff in the years before the war, but had chosen to remain with combat units instead.

Balck's account seems, at least partially, intended to exculpate himself for the mishap. Konev's account inevitably suggests that the losses suffered by 8th Panzer Division were due to judicious use of Soviet air power rather than any mistake by the Germans:

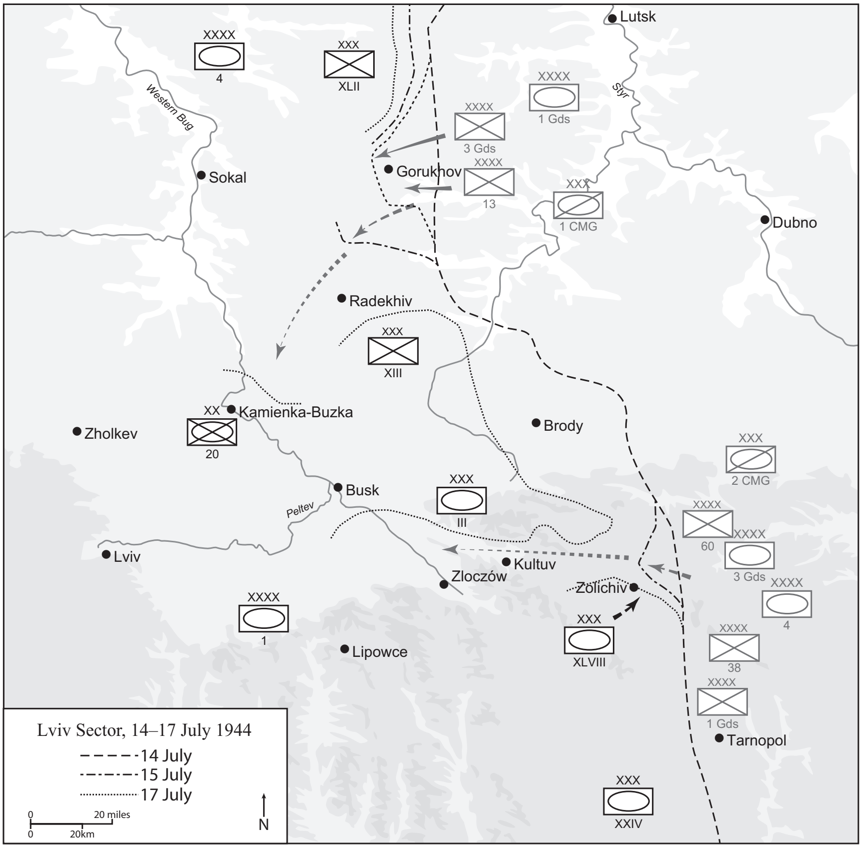
> Having created a strike force from 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions, the German command made a major counterattack on the morning of 15 July. The enemy succeeded in some areas in pushing units of Thirty-Eighth Army back about 2–4km. In order to rectify the situation, Second Air Army was ordered to use massive airstrikes by bombers and ground attack aircraft against the Nazis' armoured group in Thirty-Eighth Army's sector.

> It was here that our aviation forces that were at the disposal of the Front commander demonstrated their full strength and power. During the afternoon of 15 July, bombers and ground attack aircraft of Second Air Army flew 2,000 missions. The enemy panzer divisions were disorganised by attacks from the air and from Thirty-Eighth Army's artillery and suffered significant losses, and their offensive capability diminished greatly by the end of the day.[11]

Friebe's 8th Panzer Division was only half of the counterattacking German force. After its escape from the encirclement of First Panzer Army, 1st Panzer Division was deployed to release *SS-Frundsberg* from the front line so that, along with *SS-Hohenstaufen*, it could return to France in anticipation of the expected invasion by the Western Allies. In early May, it was in turn relieved by an infantry division and dispatched to the Lviv area to recover its strength. Although it was spared front-line duty, the division remained involved in fighting:

> In the new deployment area, wild fighting with partisans and bandits was widespread. Polish groups fought the Ukrainian nationalist groups of the *UPA*; these in turn clashed with Soviet partisan groups. Consequently, the division's units were repeatedly alerted and had to be deployed in the army's rear area in order to restore order. These occasional deployments ensured that, in the lovely, sunny Ukrainian spring and early summer, the units remained battle-ready.[12]

As soon as it received orders to move forward, 1st Panzer Division deployed its artillery in support of the infantry that had been driven back by the Soviet attack. Under constant air attack, the division's panzer regiment and one panzergrenadier regiment, combined to form an 'armoured battlegroup', moved forward, followed by the second, truck-borne panzergrenadier regiment as a second battlegroup. Despite the attentions of Soviet aircraft, 1st Panzer Division attacked as ordered and made some headway, but the setback suffered by 8th Panzer Division limited its efficacy. During the afternoon, the panzer regiments of the two divisions combined and tried again. They constituted a powerful force, with about 100 Panther tanks committed, but the Red Army demonstrated its constantly growing expertise – lines of anti-tank defences had been established as soon as the advance began, and the German counterattack rapidly became bogged down. It seems that although 8th Panzer Division had suffered substantially from Soviet air attacks, it was still able to field its entire panzer regiment and its artillery regiment provided 'outstanding' support for the attack; the failure of the counterattack,



Lviv Sector, 14–17 July 1944

14 July
15 July
17 July
0 20 miles
0 20km
N
Lutsk
XXXX
4
XXX
XLII
Western Bug
Styr
XXXX
1 Gds
XXXX
3 Gds
Gorukhov
XXXX
13
XXX
1 CMG
Sokal
Dubno
Radekhiv
XXX
XIII
XX
Kamienka-Buzka
Zholkev
20
Brody
XXX
2 CMG
Busk
XXX
III
Peltev
XXXX
60
XXXX
3 Gds
XXXX
4
Lviv
Kultuv
Zloczów
Zolichiv
XXXX
1
XXX
XLVIII
Lipowce
XXXX
38
XXXX
1 Gds
Tarnopol
XXX
XXIV

therefore, was perhaps more due to good Soviet defences than 8th Panzer Division's problems.[13] Losses in the two panzer divisions were heavy, particularly amongst the irreplaceable, experienced officers.

To Konev's irritation, Baranov's Horse and Mechanised Group wasn't ready to go into action with the northern thrusts as planned on the morning of 16 July. Indeed, the cavalry and armour didn't leave its preparation area until after midday on 16 July, triggering an angry order from Konev:

> Favourable conditions have been created to commit your group into action. Thanks to *your* indecisiveness, however, the group is inactive and is standing in place, wasting advantageous conditions. Immediately commit the entire group and, above all, XXV Tank Corps, into action to fulfil your assigned mission. *You*

> *personally*, the division commanders and XXV Tank Corps' commander will be with the forces and are to move everything forward with a firm hand [emphasis in original].[14]

Despite this urging, Baranov's units continued to move slowly and were barely a mile ahead of the leading units of Thirteenth Army by the end of the day. Regardless of these delays, the German 240th Infantry Division was driven away to the west in fragments, unable to offer coherent resistance. The commitment of 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions managed to slow down the northern part of the northern attack, but Konev's judgement had been accurate: Baranov's group would have been able to exploit energetically towards the southwest had it been in position on time. The German 20th Panzergrenadier Division, which had been held ready behind the front line further south in First Panzer Army's sector, had been moving north for several days and was ordered to intervene to try to prevent a Soviet breakout, but only its leading units would be available for at least another two days.

The delays in getting mobile forces into action might have been causing Konev a degree of frustration in the north, but the problems faced by his southern attack were more worrying. Although 8th Panzer Division had been unable to attack with all its strength as planned, the German armour operating against the southern flank of the Soviet offensive prevented any widening of the initial penetration. Additional pressure was now applied against the northern flank of the attack. In this sector, the Germans had available *SS-Freiwilligen-Division Galizien*, or 14th SS-Waffen-Grenadier Division, made up largely of men recruited from the general region where they were now fighting. The creation of this unit was authorised in April 1943, and the task fell to Otto von Wächter, the provincial governor. An Austrian lawyer, Wächter was an early adherent of the Nazi Party and was heavily involved in the failed attempt to seize power in Vienna in 1934, which resulted in the murder of Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss; he was forced to flee to Germany but returned to Vienna after the German annexation in 1938 and ran a department that identified and retired government officials who were not regarded as sufficiently pro-Nazi. He served as governor of Krakow after the defeat of Poland, where he was responsible for the implementation of increasingly severe anti-Jewish policies. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the province of Galicia was governed by Karl Lasch, but although Lasch showed great enthusiasm for persecuting the Jews, he showed equal energy in enriching himself at the same time. In other circumstances, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, might have protected an underling like Lasch, but Lasch was the protégée of Hans Franck, the governor of Poland and a long-standing enemy of Himmler. Consequently, Lasch was arrested in 1942 on charges of corruption and subsequently died – either executed in Wroclaw or Auschwitz, or by committing suicide. His replacement was Wächter; despite owing his post to Himmler, he acted with considerable circumspection, refusing to implement the plans of Obergruppenführer Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger, Himmler's personal representative, which would have seen Lviv 'Germanised' by the wholesale expulsion or killing of non-German residents. Whilst Wächter was deeply committed to the concept of a 'Greater Germany' with ultimate Germanisation of many of the conquered areas, he was reluctant to take measures that he regarded as detrimental to industrial and agricultural production, at least while hostilities continued. After a visit to the occupied parts of Ukraine, he wrote a long document to Martin Bormann, Hitler's personal secretary and head of the Nazi Party Chancellery, criticising the harshness of the measures being taken against Slavs and Jews on the grounds of the effect of these measures on productivity.

The creation of a Galician division of the SS was Wächter's idea, and it was approved following the German defeat at Stalingrad, when it was abundantly clear that Germany would need additional manpower in its fighting forces. Despite almost immediate approval, the first recruits began to gather only in the autumn of 1943 and included ethnic Germans and Ukrainians, particularly members of paramilitary and police units that had taken part in the killing of Jews after the German invasion. The division moved from its training base near Krakow to the Eastern Front in the late spring of 1944, operating behind the lines on anti-partisan missions while it completed its build-up, and was now committed to the front line in its first major experience of combat. The three regiments of the division formed up in good order and moved forward to attack, but rapidly came under withering defensive fire from the infantry formations of the Soviet Sixtieth Army. As the attack flagged, Soviet aircraft appeared and struck at the artillery positions of *SS-Galizien*, and as the small cadre of German officers became casualties, order rapidly broke down. Increasing numbers of men began to flee back towards the north.

It had been Konev's intention to commit Third Guards Tank Army to the battle as soon as Sixtieth Army had penetrated the full thickness of the German defences, but late on 15 July, Rybalko decided not to wait. After securing the approval of the political council of his army – a prudent step, intended to protect him from censure should things go wrong – he began to move his units forward late on 15 July. Two brigades – 56th Guards Tank Brigade and 69th Motorised Tank Brigade – were deployed in advance to help Sixtieth Army complete its breakthrough, and the rest of the army followed during the morning of 16 July. Almost immediately, Rybalko encountered the very problems that had led Konev to try to delay committing his tank armies until a breakthrough was complete. Although the leading brigades of Third Guards Tank Army succeeded in achieving a complete breakthrough, the breadth of the penetration was very restricted, barely three miles, with the result that there were few roads for the armoured vehicles and their support elements, particularly as the area remained congested with elements of Sixtieth Army. Constantly under German air and artillery fire, the Soviet forces struggled to expand what became known as the Kultuv corridor.

With Soviet forces advancing past either flank of the German XIII Corps, the Germans became increasingly concerned about the threat of encirclement; but almost all of their available reserves were already in action, greatly limiting their options. Moreover, the collapse of Army Group Centre meant that there was no prospect of further reserves appearing from higher commands – the only unit that was yet to enter the fray was 20th Panzergrenadier Division, and it had already been ordered to intervene against the northern penetration. As Balck continued to urge his panzer divisions to break into the Kultuv corridor, Konev ordered First Guards Tank Army to enter the battle in the northern sector with a thrust towards Rava-Ruska in the west; at the same time, Fourth Tank Army was ordered to move through the congested Kultuv corridor and envelop Lviv from the south. Baranov's group was to continue towards the southwest in order to cut XIII Corps' line of retreat.

General Vasily Danilovich Sokolovsky, 1st Ukrainian Front's chief of staff, and Moskalenko, commander of Thirty-Eighth Army, discussed the coming deployment of Fourth Tank Army with Lelyushenko late on 15 July. Orders arrived early the next morning for Fourth Tank Army to begin moving forward in order to advance through the ranks of Sixtieth Army. Late on 16 July, Lelyushenko's units began to move through the Kultuv corridor, but almost immediately became embroiled in fighting against the continued attempts by Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps to close the corridor from the south. Zaitsev's tank brigade was amongst the forces that fought in the area:

> On the night of 16–17 July, our unit made a tricky night march in difficult, rainy conditions … and just before dawn entered the Kultuv corridor behind Third Guards Tank Army as the leading unit of our corps. The offensive developed towards Zolochiv, Olshanitsa, and Podoyrkuv. The roads were flooded and slowed us. The tanks formed a single continuous column. There was heavy fighting not

> far away on either side of the road, and constant rifle and machine-gun fire. The enemy's shells were exploding just 3–4m from the column.
>
> At 0800 on 17 July, the brigade reached the western outskirts of Zolochiv. The town was ablaze. Major Nikonov's 2nd Battalion overcame enemy resistance to the southwest of Zolochiv and continued to advance. By the end of the day, he had overrun the villages of Lacke Belke and Lacke Male …
>
> The advance then stopped. The crews were exhausted. For two days the drivers didn't leave their controls, and the other crew members remained in their cramped positions. There was always extreme nervous tension when entering a breakthrough, and constant clashes with the enemy affected the physical state of the men.[15]

In order to prevent the German armour from advancing the relatively short distance that separated 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions from XIII Corps to the north, Lelyushenko was forced to commit two of his three corps to supporting the Soviet defences in the corridor, leaving just X Guards Tank Corps to continue advancing towards Lviv. The infantry of Sixtieth Army, supported by Lelyushenko's tanks, gradually widened the narrow corridor, advancing towards the town of Zolochiv to the south one village at a time; Major General Petr Nikolaevich Lashchenko, whose 322nd Rifle Division had been involved in the battle for Tarnopol earlier in the year, had recently been promoted to major general and his division was once more in the heart of the bitter fighting. He was badly wounded by artillery fire as his men closed in on Zolochiv. The unit history of 1st Panzer Division gives indications of the intensity of the fighting:

> Defending against enemy attacks, particularly by strong infantry forces, 1st Panzer Division was now fully stretched … 73rd Panzer Artillery Regiment [the division's artillery], with one battalion missing, had taken up firing positions at Zukowce. By the end of 15 July, 1st Panzer Division's command was aware that the division was fully forced onto the defensive.
>
> Under repeated attack by enemy infantry with armoured support, the panzergrenadiers were supported in their fierce battles by powerful artillery strikes. III Battalion 73rd Panzer Artillery Regiment alone fired over 8,000 rounds.
>
> The tanks and tank destroyers threw themselves repeatedly against groups of enemy tanks, both T-34s and JS-2s.[16]

The decisive moment of the Soviet breakthrough operations on either flank of the German XIII Corps came on 18 July. The leading elements of 20th Panzergrenadier

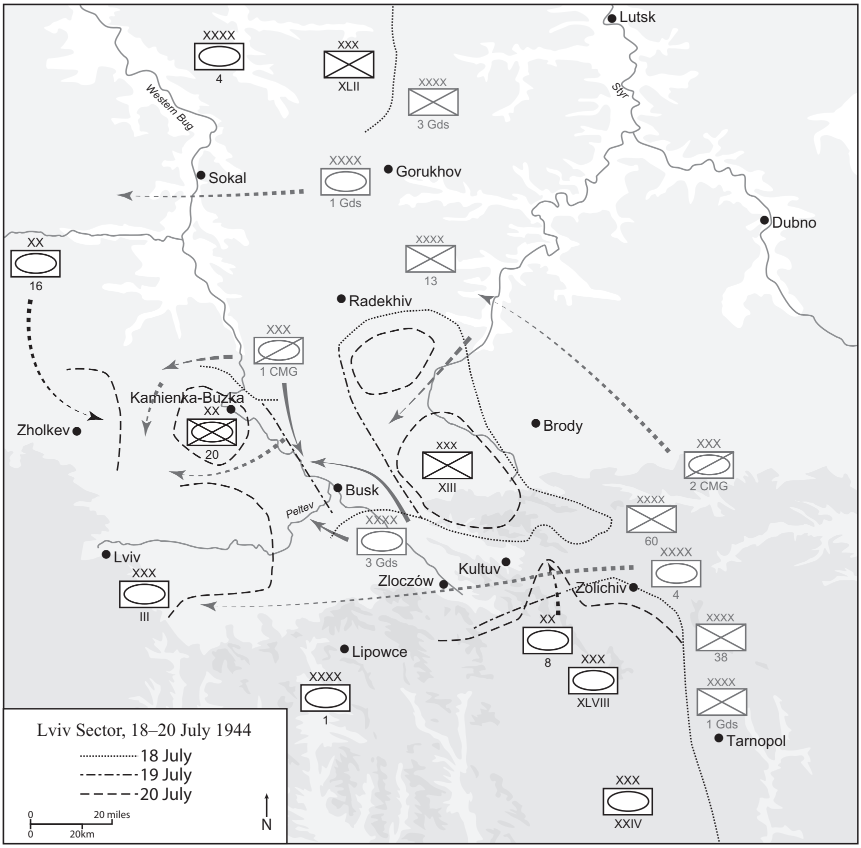
Division ran into Baranov's Horse and Mechanised Group near the town of Radekhiv and were driven back to Kamianka-Buzka, just 23 miles (37km) from the centre of Lviv. Leaving XXV Tank Corps to screen the German division, Baranov dispatched his I Guards Cavalry Corps to the south, into the rear of the German XIII Corps. Further south, the leading units of Third Guards Tank Army had reached the Peltev River the previous evening but were unable to cross until bridging engineers arrived. As the weather once more turned rainy, the Soviet engineers laboured to build bridges under repeated air attack, and during the morning the Soviet armour crossed the river and began to advance again. A brigade from IX Mechanised Corps advanced to the Western Bug, reaching the river between Busk and Derevliany, and in the latter village, its personnel encountered the riders of I Guards Cavalry Corps, advancing from the north. The German XIII Corps was encircled. In addition to the division-sized *Korps Abteilung C*, two further Wehrmacht infantry divisions, a security division, *SS-Galizien*, and a number of independent panzer and assault gun battalions were trapped.

It was immediately clear to Raus at the headquarters of First Panzer Army and to Harpe at the headquarters of Army Group North Ukraine that extracting XIII Corps was more than simply an issue of saving the men from death or imprisonment. Combined with the huge losses suffered by Army Group Centre during the course of *Bagration*, the loss of XIII Corps would tear another large hole in the German front line, and there was no prospect whatever of reserves appearing from elsewhere to restore the situation. The only reinforcements available were 20th Panzergrenadier Division, some of whose units were already heavily engaged, and 100th *Jäger* Division – an infantry division, which might be able to hold a defensive sector but couldn't compensate for the loss of all the encircled units. Similarly, it was clear to Konev that the encirclement had to be crushed as quickly as possible in order to clear the rear areas of his tank armies and to allow them to advance swiftly – there was even the threat that if the Germans were able to restore contact with the encirclement, they might be able to reverse the situation and leave Konev's armour cut off from the rest of his armies. He therefore assigned the destruction of the pocket as a high priority for units of Third Guards Tank Army and Thirteenth Army from the north, and by Fourth Guards Tank Army and Sixtieth Army from the south.

Within the encirclement, the corps commander, General Arthur Hauffe, did not at first seem to appreciate the seriousness of his position, and even as Soviet tanks and cavalry were moving across his rear areas his headquarters was still exhorting all units to hold their positions facing east; according to Soviet prisoner interrogations immediately after the battle, several officers remonstrated with him and urged him to authorise a withdrawal in order to concentrate forces for a breakout, but he refused.[17] In his defence, two years earlier Hitler had insisted – after a German operations officer was shot down over Soviet territory with a complete set of army group-level operational maps – that German field commanders were to have very limited information about the positions and movements of their neighbouring units, and given the number of encirclements suffered by the Wehrmacht in Ukraine during 1944, Hauffe may have believed that any encirclement would be temporary. Nevertheless, he ordered an independent battalion of combat engineers to carry out an immediate reconnaissance probe to the west to see whether the direct line of retreat was still open. This unit reported the presence of significant numbers of Soviet tanks, and during the early evening of 18 July Raus contacted Hauffe and ordered immediate preparations for a breakout to the south, where 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions were still fighting to prevent the Red Army from reaching Zolochiv.[18] The breakout had to take place immediately – XLVIII Panzer Corps was itself threatened with encirclement.

The units available to Hauffe for the breakout were of mixed quality. *Korps Abteilung C* had proved to be robust and well led, but *SS-Galizien* lacked experience or, according to some of its officers, the will to fight, and 361st Infantry Division was badly weakened by previous combat. As the units began to gather late on 18 July for the attempt, the inexperience of *SS-Galizien* proved to be fatal: the division's rear area units moved to the assembly area en masse in broad daylight, clearly visible to the Red Army. Nevertheless, the SS unit – supported by a handful of assault guns – successfully recaptured two villages on the southern edge of the encirclement, valuable staging areas for the rest of the corps. A thrust by 8th Panzer Division brought it close to the edge of the encirclement, but to Raus' irritation, the soldiers of XIII Corps made little or no attempt to link up with them – radio contact with Hauffe's headquarters had been lost, and Raus suspected that Hauffe had either failed to issue orders in keeping with the army commander's instructions, or was unable to due to communications problems. A small group of German infantry, acting on their personal initiative, infiltrated forward from within the encirclement and linked up with the panzer division.

It would be *Korps Abteilung C* that bore the brunt of the effort to break out of the encirclement. Backed by a battalion from 361st Infantry Division, it was to attack towards the southwest at first light on 20 July, while *SS-Galizien* and the rest of 361st Infantry Division protected its flanks. At the same time, it was hoped that Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps would attack towards the encirclement.



Lviv Sector, 18–20 July 1944

18 July
19 July
20 July
0 20 miles
0 20km
N
Lutsk
XXXX
4
XXX
XLII
XXXX
3 Gds
Western Bug
Styr
Sokal
XXXX
1 Gds
Gorukhov
Dubno
XX
16
XXXX
13
Radekhiv
XXX
1 CMG
Kamienka-Buzka
XX
20
Zholkev
Brody
XXX
XIII
XXX
2 CMG
Busk
Peltev
XXXX
3 Gds
XXXX
60
XXXX
4
Lviv
XXX
III
Kultuv
Zloczów
Zolichiv
XX
8
XXXX
38
Lipowce
XXX
XLVIII
XXXX
1
XXXX
1 Gds
Tarnopol
XXX
XXIV

However, even as the troops within the pocket began to move forward in the grey dawn light on 20 July, 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions were forced to withdraw further to the west under heavy pressure. When they reached the road where 8th Panzer Division's leading elements had halted the previous day, the soldiers of XIII Corps found no sign of their rescuers.

It was a fateful day; several hundred miles away, Oberst Klaus von Stauffenberg attended a conference in Hitler's headquarters in Rastenburg. He carried a briefcase containing two explosive devices, and was dismayed to discover that, rather than being held in the underground bunker that was usually the venue for meetings, the conference would be held in a wooden cabin. Due to a small delay in his reaching the meeting, he had to hurry to the hut and had time to arm only one of the two bombs. He placed the briefcase under the table and then left the room, ostensibly to make a telephone call. Oberst Heinz Brandt, who was attending the meeting, sat down at the seat where Stauffenberg had left the bomb, bumped his leg against the briefcase, and placed it behind a thick table leg, which was now between the bomb and Hitler. But for these mishaps – the change in location from a confined space to a building that would not contain the blast so effectively; the failure to arm both explosive devices; and the repositioning of the briefcase – the plot would probably have succeeded. Instead, although four people were killed and most of the other occupants of the room were injured, Hitler and the other senior officials present all survived.

In the front line, men of all ranks were too busy dealing with the constant crises to spare much time for what was happening in East Prussia, though it is worth noting that – in the majority of cases – there seems to have been genuine shock and anger that an attempt had been made to kill Hitler. The strength of soldiers' loyalty to the Führer was still considerable, particularly at lower levels. But it is also worth considering that those who had doubts about Hitler and the Nazis were aware of the importance of keeping their views to themselves. The men of 1st Panzer Division were perhaps typical of the soldiers on the Eastern Front:

> The report of the attempt to kill Hitler, which became known from a radio bulletin during the evening, struck the troops like a bombshell. The men of the division, who with the rest of XLVIII Panzer Corps were involved in the toughest of defensive battles on all sides, had little time for giving the assassination attempt much thought. As a result, the events of 20 July in Berlin and Rastenburg had little meaning or impact for the embattled soldiers in the front line, particularly the men of the *Ostheer* ['Eastern Army']. The urgent issues immediately before them demanded all their commitment and concentration on just one task: to hold the collapsing German lines against the constantly attacking Red Army.[19]

The attitude of ordinary soldiers is interesting in many respects. There were few officers of any rank who still believed that the war could be won in the manner that Germany had expected in 1941. Similarly, experienced soldiers in the front line knew that the Red Army was increasingly dictating the pace and sequence of events. But these officers and soldiers also remained confident that, man for man, they retained an edge over their enemies. Even if complete victory was no longer possible, many believed that Germany could still create a situation where an acceptable peace could be negotiated. The reality of course was that such a situation was almost impossible to achieve, because the Allied Powers had declared in Casablanca in 1943 that they would only accept unconditional surrender and would not negotiate with the current German regime, and senior officers were certainly aware of this. The extent to which the Casablanca Declaration was known amongst the rank and file is difficult to ascertain, and many Germans used the declaration as a means of justifying ongoing war – Germany had to reach a situation where the Allied Powers would change their mind. But given the widespread involvement of German units in the atrocities committed on the Eastern Front, ordinary German soldiers – and particularly their officers – must have known that a negotiated peace was a highly unlikely outcome.

There were also echoes of the events of 1918, when Germany was forced to seek an armistice. In the years that followed the end of the First World War, Ludendorff and others created and then propagated the myth that the undefeated German Army was 'stabbed in the back' by the collapse of the German government. The reality was that by November 1918, the war was militarily lost and the final defeat of the German Army was merely a matter of time. But in a similar manner, many soldiers saw the attempt by Stauffenberg and the other conspirators to kill Hitler as a similar 'stab in the back' for the undefeated armies in the field. Similarly, by the summer of 1944 – particularly after the success of the Normandy Landings and of *Bagration* – the Wehrmacht was doomed to final defeat, but few soldiers and officers would have had sufficient access to all the relevant information to be aware of this reality, or the underlying fact that the ultimate defeat of Germany had become almost inevitable as early as the failure to capture Moscow in 1941.

Despite being driven back, 1st Panzer Division deployed a battlegroup in an attack towards the encircled XIII Corps on 21 July, with 8th Panzer Division making an attempt a little further north – several subunits of 8th Panzer Division, including a battalion of panzergrenadiers, were trapped within the encirclement, adding to the urgency for the division. In the pocket, there was growing chaos. A small but vital bridge had been destroyed in the village of Poczapi and had to be repaired under constant air attack; as soon as it was made passable, it was immediately blocked by vehicles attempting to cross. Artillery units that were desperately needed to support the breakout were forced off the road and had to improvise crossings elsewhere, resulting in further delays. When it attempted to break out towards 8th Panzer Division, *Korps Abteilung C* managed to make a small amount of progress but was then forced to abandon much of its heavy equipment and turn further to the south. In mid-afternoon, the exhausted German infantrymen encountered the battlegroup from 1st Panzer Division, and about 3,500 men, including 400 from *SS-Galizien*, managed to escape. Other elements managed to fight their way through to 8th Panzer Division's positions, but by the following morning, the Soviet units had restored their ring. The exhausted men who reached safety were in a terrible state:

> The men of [1st Panzer] Division, who were inured to suffering, once more had to gaze on the dreadful scenes of suffering as they drove past. Hundreds – even thousands – of wounded, sick, and utterly exhausted men, fleeing and scattered, dragged along the bottomless roads in heavy rain. The roads were soon fully blocked; a few marching columns were stationary for hours.[20]

At least the weather restricted Soviet air attacks. On 22 July, the remaining elements of XIII Corps tried again to reach safety. On this occasion, any local penetrations that they achieved were rapidly eliminated. Pressure on all sides of the encirclement was relentless and late in the day the pocket was split in two. Order broke down completely and in groups ranging from just a few men to several hundred soldiers, the surviving Germans attempted to slip through to the west.

One of the German groups ran into Zaitsev's tank brigade in the Kultuv corridor:

> At about 0100, a large group of enemy infantry leaving the encirclement through Lacke Velke and Lacke Male ran into our 2nd Tank Battalion. Fierce rifle and machine-gun fire broke out and tank guns began to join in. In the deep darkness it was difficult to be sure where the enemy was, and where our own men were. Several buildings in the villages caught fire, partly illuminating the battlefield. The tanks could now aim better. Senior Lieutenant Vertiletsky, the commander of a tank rider company took bold action in the night fighting. He fought against five enemy soldiers, killing three. Koftaev ran up and killed another and they captured the last. The men of Lieutenant Seletitsky's squad captured an officer. He told them that his battalion had been ordered to break through to Lviv, which the German command said was to be held at all costs. The enemy failed to break through and by dawn had slipped back into the forest.[21]

Most of the Germans trying to escape were killed or captured by the encircling Soviet forces; a few small parties managed to reach safety, some after two weeks of evasive night marches. Perhaps 5,000 men in total escaped the encirclement. Amongst the prisoners were Hauffe and the commanders of 361st Infantry Division (Generalmajor Gerhard Lindemann) and 454th Security Division (Generalmajor Johannes Nedtwig). Just a few days later, Hauffe was killed when the vehicle in which he was being taken to a prison camp ran over a landmine.

Even while XIII Corps was in its death throes, the crisis faced by Army Group North Ukraine continued to deepen. There were reports of Soviet armour moving almost unopposed further to the west and 1st Panzer Division had to dispatch a battlegroup to Lipowce – now the Ukrainian village of Lypivtsi – about nine miles (15km) southwest of Zolochiv. Although the battlegroup reached its objective, the division was increasingly hamstrung by fuel shortages, worsened by the capture of one of the division's supply dumps by the advancing Soviet armour.

The destruction of XIII Corps removed the limitations on Konev's units and the advance to the west continued with little restriction. As early as 20 July, Konev issued orders urging his troops to press on; First Guards Tank Army was to advance to and past the city of Przemyśl, 54 miles (87km) west of Lviv; and Sokolov's Horse and Mechanised Group – until now, held in reserve – was to move to Rava-Ruska, which fell to Thirteenth Army on the same day. At the same time, First Guards Tank Army's foremost units reached the village of Grodysławice, 21 miles (34km) north of Rava-Ruska, effectively outflanking the Germans on their northern flank. Baranov's Horse and Mechanised Group was to drive forward between Lviv and Rava-Ruska, but although he managed to bypass and encircle the stubborn units of 20th Panzergrenadier Division in his path, the hapless Baranov ran into growing German resistance at Zholkev (now the Ukrainian town of Zhovkva), in the form of 16th Panzer Division. Soon, he had his hands full preventing the German armour from attacking towards the east to link up with the encircled panzergrenadier division, and once more he attracted the anger of his Front commander:

> Once again you have been drawn into frontal battles for Zholkev and have paralysed the cavalry and mechanised group for a second day. I order you to move two cavalry divisions and XXV Tank Corps forward to Nemirov and Iaroslav [24 miles or 39km further west], force the San River, and smash [enemy] headquarters and rear areas.[22]

Baranov dutifully obeyed, bypassing the elements of 16th Panzer Division in his path; to the rear of his units, the German armour managed to link up with 20th Panzergrenadier Division and extract it from its brief encirclement. At the same time, elements of Third Guards Tank Army, which had moved through the Kultuv corridor earlier, drove northwest and began to approach the northeast suburbs of Lviv.

Even as the encircled panzergrenadiers were making their escape, the tanks of Katukov's First Guards Tank Army reached and passed the small Polish village of

Bełzec. The camp where perhaps half a million Jews from Lviv and other towns had been slaughtered between December 1941 and July 1943 had been dismantled, and at first glance, there was little to see – just a modest Polish settlement close to a railway line that ran southeast to Rava-Ruska and Lviv, with a nearby farm that was encircled by a strong fence, but to the surprise of the Soviet soldiers, they saw that local Polish civilians were taking advantage of the departure of the Germans to tear down the fence and start digging in the farm. With little time to investigate, the tank crews pressed on to the west, but other Soviet units rapidly uncovered the truth. The farm had been created in the preceding year and was on the site of the Bełzec extermination camp. Most of those killed were interred in a total of 33 mass graves next to the gas chambers, but as the corpses rotted, they were exhumed and burned, and the bones ground up to hide the evidence of the killings. Aware of the deaths, Polish civilians now attempted to excavate the sites of the mass graves to seek out any valuables that had been buried with the dead, an activity that continued until after the war despite repeated attempts to stop it. One of the 'richest' areas for such activities was the site of the camp latrines, where – perhaps aware of their imminent death – Jewish prisoners had thrown away many of their belongings.[23] The commandants of the camp, Sturmbannführer Christian Wirth and Hauptsturmführer Gottlieb Hering, were long gone. When the site of the camp was captured by the Red Army, Wirth was already dead, killed by anti-Fascist partisans in Italy; Hering too was sent to Italy, and managed to evade justice at the end of the war, becoming head of the *Kriminalpolizei* (German equivalent of the British CID) in Heilbronn. In October 1945, he became unwell and died suddenly while in a waiting room in a hospital. Such was the thoroughness of the killing of Jews in Bełzec that there were few survivors, and as a result it was many years after the war before the scale of the killings – third highest in number after Auschwitz and Treblinka – was recognised and any prosecutions took place.

As the Red Army approached, Polish resistance fighters in Lviv put into action a planned uprising. Most of the men were members of the *Armia Krajowa* ('Home Army') or *AK*, which had been created around the remnants of Polish Army units after the German invasion in 1939. In anticipation of the arrival of the Red Army, the *AK* planned a series of uprisings to seize control of major towns and cities under the codename *Burza* ('Storm'); the *AK* owed its allegiance to the Polish government in exile in London, and intended to prevent the Soviet authorities from imposing their rule over Poland. On 18 July, Ukrainian paramilitary police units working for the German occupation authorities left Lviv and were organised into battalions to try to shore up the collapsed front line, and the *AK* immediately started implementing plans to seize the city. However, the arrival of Wehrmacht units in Lviv led to a postponement of the operation until 22 July.

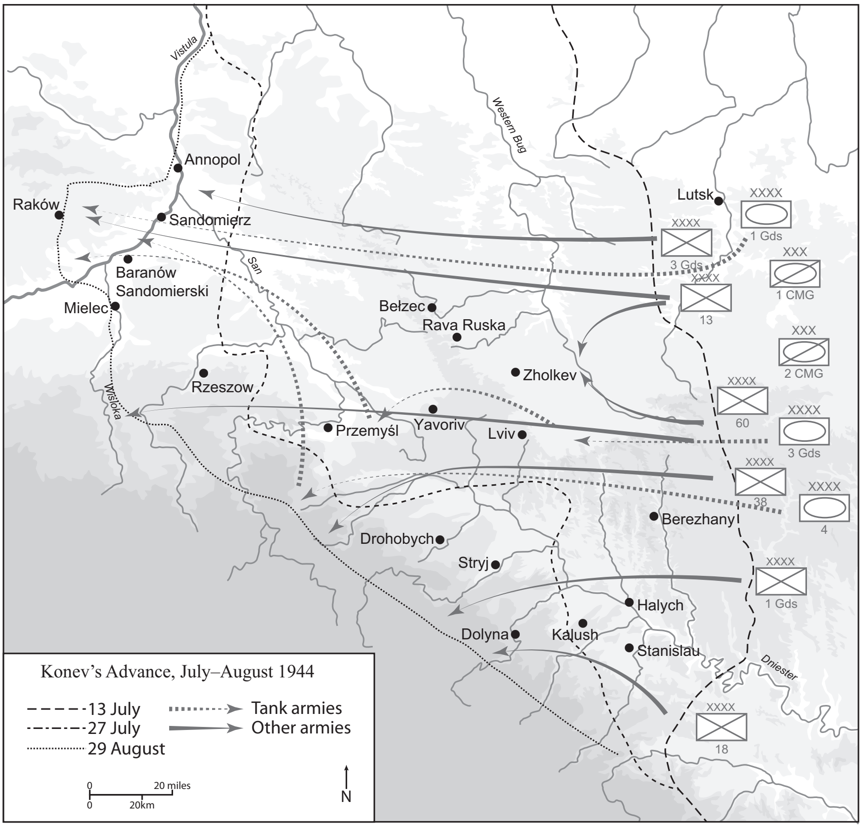
Konev had ordered Third Guards Tank Army to advance swiftly on Lviv from the north while Fourth Tank Army closed in from the south, in order to capture the city 'no later than the morning of 20 July'.[24] Fulfilling this order proved impossible. Katukov's swift advance had outstripped his supply columns, whose movements were further hindered by the torrential rain that had been a recurring feature of the campaign. The first thrusts towards the city began on 20 July, but the Germans had now established a defensive perimeter consisting of two infantry divisions and elements of a third. As the infantry of Sixtieth Army began to arrive to the east of Lviv, Lelyushenko's Fourth Tank Army was able to resume its advance, and Konev ordered Third Guards Tank Army to envelop the city from the north and west. It took until 22 July for Katukov to regroup his units and commence the envelopment but progress was rapid, reaching the town of Yavoriv – about 29 miles (47km) west of Lviv – by the end of the day.

As the Soviet 29th Tank Brigade – part of X Tank Corps from Lelyushenko's Fourth Tank Army – approached the southern outskirts of Lviv, the Poles who were waiting to implement *Burza* went into action. Under the command of General Władysław Filipkowski, they rapidly secured the eastern and southern parts of the city and the main railway station to the west of the city centre, and fighting grew heavier as the Soviet X Tank Corps moved into Lviv. On 23 and 24 July, as Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps began a general withdrawal to the west to avoid being outflanked, the German position in Lviv steadily worsened. The Poles and the Red Army were pressing into the city from north, east and south, and with Third Guards Tank Army cutting the roads to the west, the only line of escape for the Germans was to the southwest. To make matters worse, the perennial fuel shortages that had plagued the Wehrmacht continued to cause problems, both for the retreating combat units and for their supply columns. Contact between neighbouring German units was minimal and there was the constant threat of the same encirclement and destruction that had been meted out to XIII Corps being repeated. Given the disastrous situation, the only sensible measure was to pull back some distance to the west and attempt to reconstitute the defensive line in southern Poland, but Hitler continued to send shrill orders that current positions were to be held, and Lviv was not to be abandoned. Even though his strategy of holding on stubbornly in the east while smashing the enemy in the west had manifestly failed, he had no alternative.

Fortunately for the German troops in the front line, their commanders had no intention of allowing their men to be sacrificed in this manner. On 25 and 26 July, the perimeter around Lviv continued to shrink and by the following day, the city was in Soviet control. The German units that had been fighting in the city, under the control of General Smilo Freiherr von Lüttwitz's XLVI Panzer Corps, managed to escape to the southwest before they were encircled.

Much of Lviv was in ruins, and its population had suffered badly. Thousands had been sent off as forced labourers, and almost all of the Jewish population was gone, either already dead or in concentration camps. At first, relations between the *AK* and the Red Army were good, but on 3 August, Filipkowski and other senior officers were invited to a conference in Zhitomir. Here, the NKVD arrested them. Simultaneously, their men were disarmed and placed under arrest. Some managed to escape and made their way west to link up with other *AK* units; others were given the choice of imprisonment or joining the ranks of the Red Army. Filipkowski was held in a variety of prisons until late 1947 when he was handed over to the Communist government that had been installed by the Soviet Union in Poland. After further interrogation, he was freed, and died in 1950 in Pieńsk, a town on the new western border of Poland. It is noteworthy that the accounts written by the Soviet officers involved in the fighting in Lviv make no mention of the contribution of the *AK*.

Even though the Germans had abandoned Lviv and were withdrawing alongside XLVIII Panzer Corps, the situation remained desperate. The advance of First and Third Guards Tank Armies, with Baranov's Horse and Mechanised Group, had pushed far to the west and gave the Red Army a multitude of options. Konev could turn north to compound the disaster unfolding in the German Army Group South; he could turn south into the rear of Fourth and First Panzer Armies; or he could simply continue the thrust towards the west against almost no resistance. Even as the fighting in Lviv reached its climax, the Soviet VI Guards Tank Corps had reached the southern outskirts of Przemyśl and late on 26 July began an attack on the city. During the First World War, the fortress city was besieged, briefly in the autumn of 1914 and then over the winter of 1914–1915, before the starving garrison of over 100,000 Austro-Hungarian troops was overwhelmed by the Russian Army, but by 1944 it was impossible for Germany to produce anything approaching that number to man the defences. By mid-morning the following day, Przemyśl was in Soviet hands. To make matters worse for the Germans, Fifth Guards Army – which had been 1st Ukrainian Front's reserve force – was also moving west, past the northern outskirts of Lviv. In addition, the German line to the south of XLVIII Panzer Corps had been weakened to try to move troops to intercept Konev's attack, and that sector now


Konev's Advance, July–August 1944
13 July
27 July
29 August
Tank armies
Other armies
0 20 miles
0 20km
N
Vistula
Western Bug
San
Wisłoka
Dniester
Annopol
Raków
Sandomierz
Baranów Sandomierski
Mielec
Rzeszow
Przemyśl
Bełzec
Rava Ruska
Zholkev
Yavoriv
Lviv
Drohobych
Stryj
Berezhany
Halych
Dolyna
Kalush
Stanislau
Lutsk
XXXX 1 Gds
XXXX 3 Gds
XXX 1 CMG
XXXX 13
XXX 2 CMG
XXXX 60
XXXX 3 Gds
XXXX 38
XXXX 4
XXXX 1 Gds
XXXX 18

collapsed under Soviet pressure, with the result that both flanks of Balck's corps were threatened.

Still temporarily commanded by Mellenthin, Balck's chief of staff, 8th Panzer Division was dispatched south to try to shore up the line around Stanislau (now the city of Ivano-Frankivsk), while 1st Panzer Division pulled back of the Gnila Lipa and Dniester Rivers to Stryi, struggling to secure sufficient fuel to keep its vehicles moving. It was now almost normal practice for the Luftwaffe to be asked to deliver fuel supplies, but as Balck wrote in his diary, even this was not without incident:

> 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions were supposed to be supplied by air. As the aircraft roared in low over us, our own light anti-aircraft guns promptly shot two of them down. The rest of the aircraft dropped our urgently needed fuel over the Russian lines.[25]

Even though XLVIII Panzer Corps was west of the Dniester, it remained in danger due to the growing crisis. At first, Konev's instructions to the armies on his southern flank were for them to make local attacks in order to tie down German forces. As early as 16 July, this policy began to bear fruit, with First Guards Army beginning an advance towards the town of Berezhany. On 21 July, aware from prisoner interrogations and reconnaissance that the Germans were attempting to pull back, Colonel General Andrei Antonovich Grechko ordered his First Guards Army to launch a broad offensive. In its path, on the right of Balck's XLVIII Panzer Corps, was the German XXIV Panzer Corps. Its commander was Generalleutnant Fritz-Hubert Graeser, who had been an infantry regiment commander at the time of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 – just three weeks after the commencement of *Barbarossa*, he was badly wounded and had to undergo amputation of his left leg, and was left with a permanently damaged right knee. Despite this, he returned to front-line service with 3rd Panzergrenadier Division before taking up command of XXIV Panzer Corps. He had already released 100th *Jäger* Division for use further north and was in no position to put up prolonged resistance. As Graeser's units fell back, they exposed the northern flank of their southern neighbour, a mixture of Hungarian units, which rapidly became disordered under heavy attack. Some Hungarian units swiftly collapsed and tried to flee to the Carpathian passes, but others rallied and did their best to put up prolonged resistance. In the fighting of the winter of 1942–1943, the Germans repeatedly pulled back units without informing their Hungarian or Italian neighbours, and it isn't clear what measures, if any, Graeser took to ensure good communication with the Hungarians. Inevitably, German accounts of the battle emphasise the unreliability of Germany's ally.

On 23 July, Grechko's troops reached the confluence of the Dniester and Gnila Lipa Rivers at Halych. Pushing further proved to be difficult, with the Axis units fighting a skilful withdrawal to and through Stanislau, which fell to First Guards Army on 26 July. Konev now ordered Grechko to push on to the west with the intention of reaching Drohobych – about 61 miles (97km) northwest of Stanislau – within three days. This was an ambitious requirement given that the advance by First Guards Army had, to date, averaged no more than nine miles (15km) per day; nevertheless, Grechko did his best, urging his men forward. The Carpathian range was clearly visible to the southwest, and the Germans fell back from one low ridge to the next, blocking every attempt by the Red Army to exploit an open flank or small breach. The town of Kalush, about 13 miles (22km) northwest of Stanislau, changed hands several times as the Germans mounted determined counterattacks, and two German infantry divisions were encircled by Soviet units. Fortunately for the Germans, both were able to fight their way to the west.

There was further bitter fighting around Dolyna, 15 miles (25km) further west. Control of this town was of considerable importance to both sides, and the Germans planned to launch a determined counterattack to recapture it on the last day of July. They were caught out when the Red Army made an attack of its own, but in bitter fighting the Germans managed to fight their way forward, isolating and largely destroying the most advanced Soviet rifle division. The Germans felt that the battle had ended satisfactorily – even though their divisions were exhausted, they had managed to bring the Soviet advance to a halt. The Red Army also regarded the battle as a success, as several German divisions had been badly worn down in the fighting and were unable to intervene elsewhere. Both points of view have some merit. In order to allow Konev to devote his energies to the thrust into Poland and not have to contend with his southern wing thrusting southwest towards and potentially across the Carpathians, First Guards Army and Eighteenth Army were removed from his command. After the recapture of Crimea, 4th Ukrainian Front had effectively been stood down; it now took command of these two armies, and was thus inserted between 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts. Even as this change was taking place, the Soviet forces reached and captured Stryi on 5 August, effectively marking the end of their advance for the moment. Characteristically, Konev claimed in his memoirs that this rearrangement was made at his instigation, but it is not clear whether this was actually the case.

The primary purpose of 1st Ukrainian Front's offensive had been to inflict a major defeat on the opposing German forces, and to push them back beyond Lviv. By the last days of July, this had been achieved and to some extent surpassed: the German XIII Corps was destroyed, and the men who escaped would need reorganisation and re-equipment before they could function in major combat formations; Lviv had been captured; the thrust to the west had reached Przemyśl, some distance further west; and the southern flank of 1st Ukrainian Front had swept the German and Hungarian units opposing it back to the Carpathians. Despite the considerable casualties they had suffered, Konev's armies were still in good shape to continue offensive operations, particularly given the disorganisation on the German side – large elements of the front line to the west and northwest of Lviv were thinly defended, if at all, and Konev estimated that there was potentially a gap of 60 miles (100km) between the southern flank of Fourth

Panzer Army and the northern flank of First Panzer Army.[26] To exploit this, he issued fresh orders:

> On 28 July, Third Guards Army was ordered to reach the Vistula by the end of 29 July, force a crossing, seize a bridgehead on the west bank of the river, and capture Sandomierz. A crossing was also to be forced near Annopol [15 miles or 24km north of Sandomierz] by General Sokolov's Cavalry and Mechanised Group.
>
> Thirteenth Army was to reach the Vistula to the south and capture bridgeheads, while its left flank units occupied the city of Rzeszow.
>
> During the morning of 29 July, First Guards Tank Army was to strike towards Baranów Sandomierski [on the Vistula, about 15 miles or 24km southwest of Sandomierz] and capture a bridgehead by the morning of 1 August.[27]

Additionally, Third Guards Tank Army was to enter the bridgehead seized by First Guards Tank Army and advance beyond the Vistula to a depth of about 17 miles (27km) by the end of 2 August. Even with the damage that had been inflicted upon the Germans in the operation to date, this represented a challenging set of objectives, particularly as the Soviet units were struggling to bring forward supplies.

As they moved forward from their positions as Front reserve, the soldiers of Zhadov's Fifth Guards Army noted a welcome change in the circumstances in which they were advancing, as he later recalled:

> It must be said that during wartime, many facts immediately catch one's eye and depending on their significance, can have a positive or negative effect on the morale and fighting spirit of the soldiers. Thus, during this march, we watched every day from morning to late evening as groups of between 20 and 30 attack aircraft and bombers under fighter cover flew through the sky at various altitudes to strike at the enemy. We had full air supremacy. What a huge upswing this caused in the troops! Veteran soldiers who experienced the bitterness of our failures in 1941–1942 told the younger men how the Fascist vultures taunted our civilian population in those days, bombing cities and villages almost with impunity, and even pursued individuals or single vehicles. Fascist propaganda then trumpeted this to the whole world.
>
> Only a year had passed. Our Soviet skies were clear! Workers of the aviation industry, our heroic working class, had done a great job![28]

Supported by Sokolov's Horse and Mechanised Group, Third Guards Army seized the Polish town of Annopol late on 29 July and reached the Vistula on a frontage of about 15 miles (25km). Immediately, the soldiers began to improvise means of crossing the river, which is about 500m wide at this point. Bridgeheads were seized at several points and by the end of July, three such toeholds had been established on the west bank. However, the Wehrmacht was recovering its balance and Fourth Panzer Army dispatched a variety of units to the region under the command of General Hermann Recknagel's XLII Corps and the bridgeheads came under constant pressure. Katukov's First Guards Tank Army to the south also had a difficult time, finding that Soviet air supremacy was not guaranteed:

> In the Sandomierz area there were two bridges, one for wheeled vehicles and another about 5km [three miles] downstream for the railway line. 'Clearly the Germans will blow these bridges,' said Shalin [a brigade commander], 'and our troops will be held up for a long time. Better to force a crossing where the enemy doesn't expect us.'
>
> We decided to send forward Musatov's 6th Motorcycle Regiment. I ordered him to clear the approaches to the Vistula, to cross the river near Baranów, securing and holding a bridgehead for leading units of the corps …
>
> On the right flank of the army, XI Tank Corps advanced with 44th Guards Tank Brigade leading, and VIII Guards Mechanised Corps was on the left with 1st Guards Tank Brigade as the vanguard …
>
> So, having completed a 90km [54-mile] march on 28 July, the army concentrated near Leżajsk. At 0800 on 29 July, the motorcycle regiment with part of a pontoon park moved to the Vistula … Overcoming the resistance of small enemy groups, the scouts reached the river and took possession of Baranów. They hastily constructed several rafts but a 'Frame' [Red Army slang for the German Fw 189 reconnaissance plane] overhead radioed for air strikes. Bombs rained down just as the men began to cross. The rafts were smashed and the men had to start from scratch.
>
> Amongst the first to reach the Vistula was a reconnaissance group commanded by V. N. Podgorbunsky (one T-34, two armoured infantry carriers and a platoon of submachine gunners), and they tried to cross to the west bank. The guardsmen seized a small ferry and at 2200 on 29 July a squad of submachine gunners reached the far bank. Other units acted decisively. By midnight 200 men from the motorcycle regiment and Podgorbunsky's reconnaissance group were fighting on the west bank. Shortly after, the leading tank corps approached the river. The motorised infantry proceeded to force the river, which was 400m wide and 3–4m deep, by improvised means. Two bridgeheads were established, each about 3km [2 miles] wide and up to 3km deep. The situation was complicated by the fact

> that no tanks or heavy guns could cross. The advanced units of Thirteenth Army reached the Vistula that night but they too were forced to use improvised means of crossing without artillery. The pontoon park of the army was hit by enemy bombers and destroyed. During the evening, the pontoons of First Guards Army began to arrive and at 0300 a 50-ton ferry was constructed. The first vehicle to be taken across was the tank from Podgorbunsky's group.
>
> A bridge was then built in the Baranów area. The Polish population helped greatly. Civilians living near the river brought wood, logs – all that they had. They even had boats they had hidden from the Fascists.
>
> One elderly local led the reconnaissance troops to places where the bank sloped gently to the river, where Russian troops had crossed during the First World War. This greatly helped us, saving us from much digging and effort …
>
> By the end of 31 July, we managed to merge our bridgeheads together. We now held a stretch of the western bank 15km [nine miles] wide and up to 10km [six miles] in depth.[29]

Repeated German counterattacks near Annopol eliminated one of the small bridgeheads, but the advance of Thirteenth Army's 350th Rifle Division into the Baranów bridgehead proved to be crucial. Four further rifle divisions swiftly followed as fighting began to intensify. The arrival of ever more Soviet units in the area could not be matched by the Germans, and the bridgeheads slowly grew.

Nehring's command of Fourth Panzer Army came to an end on 5 August; he was once more struggling with a medical condition and at first he was switched with Balck, taking command of XLVIII Panzer Corps while Balck took over Fourth Panzer Army, but just a few days later, Nehring was hospitalised and command of Balck's old panzer corps passed to Graeser. Balck acted with customary energy, ordering Graeser to mount aggressive attacks to stop the Red Army from expanding its bridgeheads. Whilst Balck scraped together depleted and improvised units to defend his positions, Konev dispatched the still-fresh Fifth Guards Army to use its XXX Rifle Corps to drive back German forces that were still east of the Vistula, to the south of the bridgehead that Katukov had secured. At the same time, the army's two other rifle corps were to cross into the Baranów bridgehead.

The Soviet XXX Rifle Corps attacked towards the town of Mielec during the afternoon of 4 August. It ran into the German 24th Panzer Division, brought north to intervene in the crisis, and there were several clashes along the line of the Wisloka River. After two days, Mielec was in Soviet hands, but attempts to push further west were repeatedly defeated. Both sides claimed the battle as a success, and both sides suffered substantial losses. Although it claimed the destruction of 39 enemy tanks and 70 anti-tank guns, 24th Panzer Division lost many of its tanks and perhaps more importantly more of its diminishing core of experienced officers, including. Hauptmann Hans-Joachim Glemann, commander of the artillery regiment's armoured artillery battalion, who was one of the longest serving members of the regiment, having volunteered for service with the artillery regiment of the old 1st Cavalry Division – the predecessor of 24th Panzer Division – in 1935.[30]

The two rifle corps from Fifth Guards Army that crossed the Vistula were used to shore up the defences on the southern side of the bridgehead, and they arrived just in time. Balck had managed to scrape together a substantial force, taking a calculated risk by weakening the rest of Fourth Panzer Army's sector to do so – his assessment that Konev's troops were operating at the end of long supply lines and would therefore not be able to react quickly to take advantage of his move proved to be correct. He brought III Panzer Corps, with 8th and 17th Panzer Divisions, and XLVIII Panzer Corps, with 1st, 16th and 23rd Panzer Divisions, back across the Vistula and attacked on 11 August:

> Within just a few days [the bridgehead] had been reduced to one third of its original size, but we did not succeed in eliminating it. The Russian forces were too strong. We estimated their strength at approximately four tank armies and one infantry army, supported by strong air assets. Our own troops were also showing clear signs of wear and exhaustion. The staff officers were no longer leading from the front. Almost all of them had established their command posts in buildings. It was understandable, then, that the troops attacked in only the most lax manner. In one division, which had a good reputation, I found all of the officers of an infantry regiment that was attacking, positioned in houses and commanding by telephone. I had travelled forward in a *Kettenkrad*; I loaded them aboard and drove them forward ... A newly arrived Tiger battalion lost all but three of its 45 Tigers within 24 hours because of mechanical breakdowns. Almost daily I noted in my journal that the troops no longer understood how to exploit initial successes.[31]

The Tiger tanks Balck mentions were amongst the first of the new 'King Tigers' to be deployed on the battlefield and on this occasion belonged to *Schwere Panzer Abteilung 501*. Like the original Tiger, they were armed with an 88mm gun, though with a longer barrel, thus allowing for a larger propellant charge and hence greater muzzle velocity. Their hull used sloping armour and resembled that of the Panther. However, the new tank weighed nearly 70 tons and was driven by the same engine as its predecessor, and the mechanical strain that this placed on the engine was the cause of frequent breakdowns. The early production vehicles were also crippled by problems with fuel and oil seals; these improved over time, but the engine and drive chain in particular remained a source of problems. Nevertheless, by early 1945 the tank had become somewhat more reliable than the Panther, which continued to be plagued with problems. Balck's implied criticism of the personnel of *Schwere Panzer Abteilung 501* is somewhat unfair – this was their first operational deployment with the new tank, and given the experiences with Panther tanks, it should not have been surprising that there were serious reliability issues. Konev too mentioned the appearance of the new German tanks:

> In one of the tank battles, the Hitlerite command deployed a battalion of new super-heavy tanks, the Panzer VI B or 'King Tigers'. But this attack, intended to surprise us, ended in complete failure. The Tiger tank battalion was destroyed by the devastating fire of our tanks and heavy artillery. These King Tigers were easy prey for our troops. Ten of the tanks were captured intact and sent to Moscow.[32]

It is understandable that Soviet gunners should claim 'kills' when German tanks that they brought under fire came to a halt and were abandoned, but almost all of the losses of *Schwere Panzer Abteilung 501* were the result of mechanical failures; however, three of the new tanks were knocked out by a T-34/85 that ambushed them at close range, demonstrating that in the right circumstances, even the newest German tanks weren't invulnerable.

The fighting also saw further examples of the tactics that the Red Army had used so effectively to blunt German armoured attacks. Despite delays in reaching its start line – caused by the heavy King Tigers blocking the roads whenever they broke down or became stuck – 3rd Panzer Division was able to start its attack on the Soviet bridgehead on time:

> A short artillery preparation opened the attack of the division. The reconnaissance battalion, attached to the panzer regiment, eliminated enemy outposts in the patches of woods west of Raków [30 miles or 49km west of Sandomierz] and then advanced on the village with both of its light half-track companies and the tanks of the panzer regiment. The attack unfolded as if on a training exercise. But the initial success was then greeted by concentrated fire from enemy anti-tank guns, which had been emplaced east of the Czarna [River] in excellently camouflaged

> positions. Two tanks from 6 Coy were immediately knocked out and the half-track of Leutnant Kühn received a direct hit, killing all on board. A sharp fight for the bridge developed, but it was taken in the end after an aggressive attack by the half-tracks and tanks. The resistance in the village flared up again and heavy fighting ensued. With some difficulty it was possible to advance to the far side of the village.
>
> … The enemy put up a desperate defence. Correspondingly, the German attack only made step-by-step progress. It was not until evening that Raków was in German hands. By then, the Soviets had brought forward heavy artillery and Stalin Organs, which constantly ploughed up the terrain. There were a lot of casualties …
>
> The next day, 12 August, represented no significant change. Since the Soviets had no tanks in front of [this] sector, it was only their numerical superiority in artillery that made life difficult for the German forces. Whenever a T-34 appeared to conduct some reconnaissance, it was swiftly eliminated by the division's fighting vehicles. In place of the enemy tanks however, the enemy's anti-tank guns had become a dangerous opponent. The guns had been well emplaced behind stacks of grain and allowed the German tanks to roll past, only to engage them from the rear.
>
> … The Red Air Force dominated the air space. Several low-level attacks on 13 August forced the division command post to be moved into the woods at Osówka [about 4 miles or 7km southwest of Raków]. Considerable losses were reported by the battalions.[33]

The Soviet account of the fighting in the bridgehead is inevitably somewhat different from Balck's memoirs, giving the impression of an orderly, well-managed defence. Monyushko had been sent forward from his training regiment to join one of Thirteenth Army's anti-tank artillery regiments and was assigned to a unit equipped with ZIS-3 76mm guns, and his description of fighting gives a useful insight into the manner in which both sides operated, and how the Germans were adapting their tactics to try to deal with the widespread use of camouflaged anti-tank guns:

> Although [the 76mm anti-tank gun] was an excellent gun, it was too weak by 1944 to fight the newer German tanks. Its armour-piercing shell couldn't penetrate the Tiger tank even at almost point-blank range. Only the scarce sub-calibre shells could help there, and even these couldn't penetrate the frontal armour of the Ferdinand self-propelled guns … Out of 30 cases of ammunition,

> only two contained sub-calibre shells, eight were armour-piercing ammunition, and the rest were shrapnel or high-explosive shells …
>
> For me – and as far as I can tell from conversations with my comrades, for all the soldiers of my regiment – the fighting unfolded in this manner. After a short but heavy artillery bombardment, the Germans would attack with their tanks. The heavy Tigers and Ferdinands ascended hills deep within the German positions and halted 1.5km from our own positions. Then the lighter and more manoeuvrable Pz.IVs moved forward with a few infantry. There was little point in us firing on the vehicles to the rear. Even with a direct hit, our projectiles caused little serious damage at that range. And the German tank crews waited until our anti-tank defences were forced to open fire on the tanks advancing ahead. When a gun opened fire, it immediately came under accurate fire from the stationary heavy vehicles. It should be noted that the Tigers had very good gunsights and very accurate 88mm guns.
>
> Hence the advice I received not to fire until the last moment. Having opened fire from ‘pistol shot range’, you could count on getting a hit with the first or, in extreme cases, the second shell, and then, even if the gun was destroyed, the ‘exchange rate’ was still unfavourable for the Germans – a tank for a light gun. However, if we revealed our position too soon, it was highly likely that our weapon would be lost in vain …
>
> In practice, the ZIS-3 gun didn’t require the presence of the entire crew near the gun. It was usually enough for just one person to be present. The gunner would fire a shot and then hide in a foxhole while the loader pushed another round into the breech. Then the gunner took his place, aimed, and fired, while the loader took shelter. Even if the gun took a direct hit, at least one of the two had a good chance of survival. The rest of the crew were dispersed in foxholes and side trenches.
>
> The practical experience accumulated since the Battle of Kursk kept losses to a minimum. In the six weeks of fighting in the bridgehead, the regiment replaced its equipment three times, receiving new or repaired guns to replace damaged and destroyed ones, and retained its combat capability, almost without receiving any replacement personnel.[34]

Crucially, the city of Sandomierz fell to the Red Army on 18 August, but although Stalin asked Konev whether it might be possible to push forward with one of his tank armies towards Krakow, it was clear to both Konev and *Stavka* that further gains were unlikely to be achieved, and 1st Ukrainian Front adopted a defensive posture while the substantial gains of the operation were consolidated.

The achievement of Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front was considerable. Its offensive moved the front line about 190 miles (307km) west, driving the Germans from areas that the Red Army had occupied when it moved into eastern Poland in 1939. In addition, the Soviet advance destroyed the German XIII Corps. Many of the German divisions that managed to escape were badly mauled, and whilst Soviet casualties were – as was usually the case – heavier than those on the German side, the discrepancy wasn't as great as in earlier operations. German soldiers killed, wounded or captured numbered a little under 137,000, compared to a Soviet figure of about 224,000.[35] In terms of how the operation unfolded, there were considerable improvements with earlier operations. In particular, as was the case a little to the north during *Bagration*, the swiftness with which encircled German troops were eliminated allowed the advance to be maintained at a high tempo, thus maximising the dislocating impact of the initial successes of the Red Army and giving the Germans little opportunity to regain their balance. Ultimately, it was the length of logistic lines that brought the Red Army to a halt as much as German resistance. To be sure, Konev had a major advantage in that he deployed three experienced tank armies on a narrow front, but the success of the operation was nonetheless a major achievement. One measure of this is that the operation was originally entitled the 'Lviv-Przemyśl Operation', and the name was changed to reflect the additional advance beyond the Vistula to Sandomierz. However, direct comparison with the attacks to encircle *Gruppe Stemmermann* at Korsun and the fighting that followed, including the brief encirclement of First Panzer Army, must take into account that despite the frequent, disruptive rain showers experienced by the Red Army during the advance to Lviv and beyond the Vistula, ground conditions were far better. In particular, it was possible for Soviet air units to move to improvised airfields as Konev's armies advanced, thus providing a degree of air support that was lacking in earlier operations. Whilst coordination of this air support was still far from the standard enjoyed by the Germans or the Western Allies, the wide-reaching raids against targets of opportunity – German reinforcements and supply columns, and headquarters units – were frequently disruptive. And the presence of so many Soviet fighters made it far harder for the Germans to deploy their air support as effectively as they had in the past. Aircraft types that had proved obsolescent in the west even as early as 1940, such as the Stuka, had taken advantage of the relative lack of interference by Soviet aircraft through 1941, 1942 and even 1943, but Soviet fighters were now operating in increasing numbers and with greater skill. The ability of the Luftwaffe to intervene in ground combat and compensate for disparities in numbers and firepower was no longer something on which the Wehrmacht could rely.

The losses suffered by the tank armies and two Horse and Mechanised Groups were substantial – it is estimated that only about a third of the tanks and assault guns available at the start of the operation were still available at the end. It should be remembered, though, that Panther tank units suffered similar rates of attrition purely due to mechanical breakdown. In this field too, the Red Army had made considerable improvements. Emulating the Germans, the Soviet tank armies paid particular attention to providing mobile repair teams to help recover disabled or broken-down tanks; the engineers with Rybalko's Third Guards Tank Army, for example, recorded that they repaired vehicles on 948 occasions, returning vital tanks and assault guns to the front line.[36] Without this effort, the number of available combat vehicles at the end of the operation would have been far lower.

The Germans expected a resumption of Soviet attacks towards the west, but there was a general pause. It would take time for roads, railways and bridges to be repaired and thus allow the build-up of supplies for a new offensive, and even the vast resources of the Soviet Union couldn't sustain operations on all fronts at a high level of intensity. Attention now turned to the northern and southern sectors of the Eastern Front. In the north, the Red Army would try – successfully – to isolate the German Army Group North on the Baltic coast. In the south, in the expectation that the diversion of resources to repair the hole torn by *Bagration* and Konev's operation would have weakened German forces, there would be a resumption of fighting around Kishinev and Iaşi, with the intention of knocking Romania out of the war and thus eliminating German access to the Ploesti oilfields.

CHAPTER 13

THE DISINTEGRATING AXIS

The borders of Eastern Europe have seen many changes since the fall of the great European empires at the end of the First World War. Today, the territory where the last major Soviet operations in the southern sector of the Eastern Front were conducted in 1944 is no longer under Russian or Ukrainian rule, and is either part of Romania or Moldova. Often known in history as Bessarabia or Moldavia, Moldova was ceded to the Russian Empire by the Ottoman Empire in the Treaty of Bucharest in 1812 and throughout the second half of the century the Russian authorities systematically attempted to 'Russify' the region. As Russian authority disintegrated after the February Revolution in 1918, Bessarabia declared its independence and two months later voted to become part of Romania; although this was recognised by the Western Powers in the Treaty of Paris in 1920, the Soviet Union never accepted that Moldova should be anything other than Soviet territory. Consequently, when Molotov and Ribbentrop negotiated their infamous division of Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, Stalin instructed Molotov to ensure that the Germans recognised the right of the Soviet Union to take control of the region. During the summer of 1940, Stalin issued Romania with an ultimatum demanding that Bucharest cede control of the region to Moscow. The Romanians felt that they had no choice but to comply, and the area became the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Recovery of Moldova was a major consideration in Romania's decision to aid Germany in the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. During their brief period of control in the region, the Soviet authorities deported over 18,000 residents to Siberia in order to consolidate their grip. Many of these deportees were executed, either immediately or in prison camps, but worse was to follow. The region had a large Jewish population and, as already described, the Romanians were willing collaborators in German anti-Jewish policies. About 147,000 Moldovan Jews were killed by the Axis powers, most of them in the early months of occupation.[1]

The fighting around Iaşi and Kishinev in the spring of 1944 marked the end of the Soviet advance that began immediately after the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, but there were few who believed that the Red Army would not attack again. The war had turned out disastrously for Romania and by this stage of the war many Romanians were desperate to find a way out of the conflict. After tentative early contacts, representatives of the Romanian Communist Party – acting with the full knowledge and approval of Moscow – met Romanian military and civilian representatives in a secret late-night meeting in June 1944. The diplomats representing King Michael of Romania suggested that the king should meet the German ambassador and advise him that he intended to replace the government of Ion Antonescu, but the Communist representatives at the meeting regarded such a move as folly. They pointed out that the Germans had shown no hesitation in sending troops into Hungary and installing a puppet government, and would probably attempt to do the same in Romania. Instead, they suggested that the Romanian Army should be ordered to turn its weapons against the Germans, and that Antonescu should be summoned to the king's palace and ordered to seek an immediate armistice with the Allied Powers – if he refused, he should be arrested. This was the only way that a German occupation might be avoided.

Preparations for the defection of Romania began, but had to be carried out in strict secrecy – the Romanians were aware that the Germans were already suspicious that some such plan might be in existence, and had to move very carefully. In the meantime, the Red Army turned its attention once more to a military means of knocking Romania out of the war.

The Red Army's summer battles against Army Group Centre and Army Group North Ukraine had resulted in major – probably war-winning – gains, but the scale of the battlefield was so immense that it would take time for communications to be restored in the newly recovered territories before a killing thrust into the German heartland could be mounted. Aware that discussions amongst the Western Allies were already looking at the possible shape of post-war Europe, the Soviet Union naturally wished to create as favourable a situation as possible before the fighting concluded. To that end, *Stavka* decided that there was an opportunity to drive deep into the Balkan region, effectively establishing Soviet hegemony in the area. This would see the achievement of something that had long been an ambition of Russian governments dating back to Tsarist rule, when 'pan-Slavism' became a popular concept – with, of course, the assumption that as it was the largest Slav nation, Russia (and later, the Soviet Union) would be the dominant member of any pan-Slav grouping.

Many of the armies that had advanced so relentlessly across western Ukraine in 1943 and early 1944 had departed from the southern sector by the summer of 1944 in order to provide forces for *Bagration* and Konev's attack towards Lviv and Sandomierz. Nevertheless, Kravchenko's Sixth Tank Army and Pliev's Horse and Mechanised Group remained available to exploit any penetration. Overall, the balance of power was greatly in favour of the Red Army, with an estimated strength in this sector of over 886,000 men and 1,800 tanks and assault guns, opposed by 430,000 Germans and Romanians with just 170 tanks and assault guns.[2] Furthermore, the Red Army was now highly accustomed to thinning out its units in non-critical areas in order to concentrate its resources for its planned attacks.

These numbers are, however, somewhat misleading. The Soviet units in this sector were from 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts, which had suffered heavy losses during the advances up to May 1944. With priority being given to preparations for the summer offensive against the German Army Group Centre, the armies of these two fronts received relatively fewer replacement drafts in the early summer of 1944 and had to rely upon men forcibly conscripted into their ranks during their recent advance. About 265,000 of 2nd Ukrainian Front – over half its strength – were such recruits, as were 80,000 of 3rd Ukrainian Front's 348,000 men. They had enjoyed a period of rest and recuperation during the first months of the summer, during which units were ordered to carry out rigorous training of their new recruits. As a result, these recruits were far better prepared than – as described earlier – men who were swiftly dispatched to take part in the fighting around Sevastopol just days after they were liberated, but the standard that had been achieved still fell far short of what might be regarded as a desirable level.

When *Stavka* drew up plans for a further operation in this sector, it did so in full awareness of the continuing negotiations with King Michael. The geography of the region played its part in Soviet considerations – the Carpathian Mountains to the west represented a daunting barrier, allowing relatively weak Axis forces to defend the line by blocking the mountain passes until winter intervened. During the First World War, both sides had attempted to fight their way through these passes, resulting in some of the bloodiest and most futile battles of the entire conflict.[3] The area immediately to the east of the mountains was crossed by several rivers, which arose in the foothills and made their way southeast towards the Black Sea, and rather than risk delays occasioned by forcing crossings, most of the Soviet operation would see the armies of the two Fronts proceeding south and southeast along the corridors of land between the rivers. At the same latitude that the Carpathian chain turned away to the west, the Soviet armies would reach (and hopefully cross) the Danube, and would then be able to advance into the heart of Romania. In principle, this represented a diversion of effort away from any direct advance towards the heart of the Third Reich, but the reality was that the forces available were very limited, and rather than taking risks by trying to attack to the west, Stalin and his immediate circle decided that knocking Romania out of the war was a sufficiently ambitious objective.

As usual, the new Soviet offensive would see a phased start. It would commence with 2nd Ukrainian Front's Twenty-Seventh and Fifty-Second Armies attacking northwest of Iaşi, where Konev's attacks towards Târgu Frumos had come to grief earlier in the year. It was expected that it would be possible to unleash Sixth Tank Army towards the end of the first day and with the intention of reaching Vaslui – 37 miles (59km) south of Iaşi – and then pressing on to Focşani, a further 70 miles (112km) beyond, over the following six days. At the same time, XVIII Tank Corps would operate a little to the east. Starting a little after 2nd Ukrainian Front, the neighbouring 3rd Ukrainian Front was to strike west and northwest with the intention of encircling the German and Romanian forces around Kishinev by linking up with XVIII Tank Corps. It is a measure of the growing sophistication of the Red Army that, far from having to dictate precisely how units were to proceed and then rigidly adhering to the plan regardless of how it unfolded, IV Guards Mechanised Corps was briefed that it was either to advance southwest to Cahul on the Prut River, about 48 miles (77km) east of Focşani, or northwest to Leova, also on the Prut, in order to seal the encirclement of Axis units further north – the corps was to plan for either option, and would receive final orders once the operation began to unfold.

Throughout the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, the assessment of intelligence about Soviet intentions and capabilities was the responsibility of a department known as *Fremde Heere Ost* ('Foreign Armies East', abbreviated to *FHO*). Reinhard Gehlen, at that time holding the rank of Oberstleutnant, became head of this department in 1942. It is thought that he realised at an early stage that Germany would lose the war and the current conflict would be followed rapidly by another conflict, either diplomatic or military, between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union, and to an extent his activities thereafter reflected this view; he carefully preserved as much information as he could with the intention of handing it over to the Americans at the end of the war.[4] As the war progressed, the accuracy of the information presented by *FHO* became poorer and was treated with increasing doubt by the German high command, but there was little by way of any alternative. The gathering of intelligence was based upon a mixture of radio interception, human intelligence, and aerial reconnaissance. Although radio discipline in the Red Army was poor in the early stages of the war, this was an area in which the Soviet forces showed a huge improvement as hostilities progressed, both by maintaining radio silence and by attempting to deceive German listeners with false radio messages. Human intelligence, either from 'traditional' spies or from local reconnaissance on the ground and prisoner interrogations, was also increasingly ineffective, and by mid-1944 the ability of the Luftwaffe to provide adequate aerial reconnaissance was very limited. As a result, the briefings provided by *FHO* were frequently little more than the expectations of its staff based upon past events. Partly to hide the weakness of his source material, Gehlen drafted reports that were masterpieces of ambiguity, and in early August *FHO* advised Hitler and *OKH*:

> The situation opposite Army Group South Ukraine makes a large enemy offensive operation unlikely in the near future … however, an offensive against Romania is undoubtedly an important part of overall Soviet intentions.[5]

Although the limited reconnaissance sources of the Luftwaffe found increasing evidence of a Soviet build-up over the following days, a report just five days before the Soviet offensive began also raised little concern:

> Since the beginning of summer operations, the situation opposite Army Group South Ukraine has featured the withdrawal of enemy forces in strength for use against Army Groups North Ukraine and Centre (in total, two or three tank armies, eight to ten mobile corps, three infantry armies, and 28 rifle divisions). It cannot be ascertained whether this redeployment continues, but … it seems likely. A major attack with far-reaching objectives against Army Group South Ukraine therefore seems unlikely …
>
> The enemy will be aware that German forces withdrawn from Romania have been used mainly to stabilise the fronts of Army Groups North Ukraine and Centre. The enemy must therefore wish to prevent the withdrawal of further German forces. Air reconnaissance suggests that attack groups are being prepared by both 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts south of Tiraspol and north of Iaşi.
>
> Both of these groups could enter combat at short notice.[6]

It was only on 17 August that Gehlen's report showed any greater degree of concern, noting the appearance of substantial overnight reinforcements around

Iaşi that increased the likelihood of strong attacks that might develop into something more than local operations. Crucially, there remained little attention to the preparations being made by 3rd Ukrainian Front to the south of Tiraspol until 19 August, the eve of the Soviet offensive. These briefings were intended to inform *OKH* so that decisions could be made about prioritising the use of Germany's dwindling reserves; on the front line, commanders from army group down made their own assessments and took what steps they could. Given the widespread belief that the Romanian troops were too weak to stand firmly against Soviet attacks, a considerable effort had been made to improve their performance, with German teams being attached to Romanian units to oversee training. A company from 3rd Panzer Division's reconnaissance battalion, for example, was working with the Romanian 1st Armoured Division. Romanian and German units that had suffered casualties during the fighting earlier in the year received replacement drafts to restore their strength and the German panzer divisions were pulled out of the front line to allow them to re-equip and to be available for intervention wherever required. The availability of the soldiers withdrawn from Crimea provided both nations with a pool of experienced men who could be used to restore the fighting power of the battered infantry divisions. Another important consideration was the stockpiling of supplies, and here the Germans encountered considerable difficulties due to local political issues.

The region of Transylvania, contained by the curve of the Carpathian Mountains to the east and south, was extensively settled by farmers from Saxony during the 12th and 13th centuries when the region was part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The Romanian population was in the minority and the region endured invasion first by the Mongols and then the Ottoman Turks; during this latter period, Transylvania was largely an autonomous part of the Ottoman Empire, but the Romanians were excluded from power, which was shared by the Hungarians and Germans. By the end of the 17th century, the region was once more united with Hungary as part of the Habsburg Empire, but the Romanian population – deprived of religious and other liberties – remained restless, and there were occasional armed clashes. For a while, Vienna imposed direct rule, but after the creation of the Dual Monarchy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, control returned to Budapest. As the First World War drew to a close, Romanian troops invaded Transylvania resulting in a conflict between Romania and the now independent Hungary that continued until late 1919, when Romanian troops briefly occupied Budapest. They withdrew the following year, and the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon recognised that Transylvania was now part of Romania.

Tensions between the two nations over the region continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1940, the Italian and German governments attempted to resolve matters at a conference in Vienna. When Romania ceded control of Moldova to the Soviet Union, the Hungarians pressed for the return of Transylvania to Hungary. After rejecting the initial Hungarian demands, which would have handed over a large area with a majority Romanian population to Budapest, the Germans and Italians drew up an arbitration statement that assigned northern Transylvania – where the Hungarian and Romanian populations were roughly equal – to Hungary. But far from settling the dispute, the arbitration left both nations dissatisfied; the area that had been ceded to Hungary contained a substantial Romanian minority, while the area that remained in Romanian control contained a substantial Hungarian minority. There were a few small clashes between armed men from both sides and even after both nations joined Germany in the war against the Soviet Union, the Hungarian and Romanian armies retained considerable forces along their mutual border.

The relevance of this ongoing dispute and tension to the Wehrmacht was that German supply lines for Army Group South Ukraine ran through the two nations and across the disputed border. Speaking after the war, a German officer recalled:

> Mutual aversions, and even chicanery, produced the most losses in time. Every control over transport was lost. Corrective action by the army group was forbidden by the German *OKW* since friendly countries were involved. Particularly during the first days of the defensive battles along the Dniester River, this very often brought us to the edge of despair. Necessary communications were missing. Transports from the Reich took up to three weeks. Very often whole trains were missing. They had to be found by aircraft which flew up and down the railway line and then, after the straightforward bribing of the conductor, they would be brought to the front.[7]

Matters were further complicated for the Germans by the manner in which Hitler had divided responsibilities between different bodies. Within the armed forces there were two main high commands: *Oberkommando des Heeres* ('Army High Command' or *OKH*), and *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* ('Armed Forces High Command' or *OKW*). The former was responsible purely for the Eastern Front, and the latter had responsibility for all other theatres. This slightly unwieldy arrangement managed to function fairly smoothly until the retreating

German forces on the Eastern Front began to pull back into Romania, and were now increasingly dependent upon rear areas that were under the control of *OKW*. This additional layer of complexity made the logistic difficulties of Army Group South Ukraine even harder to resolve.

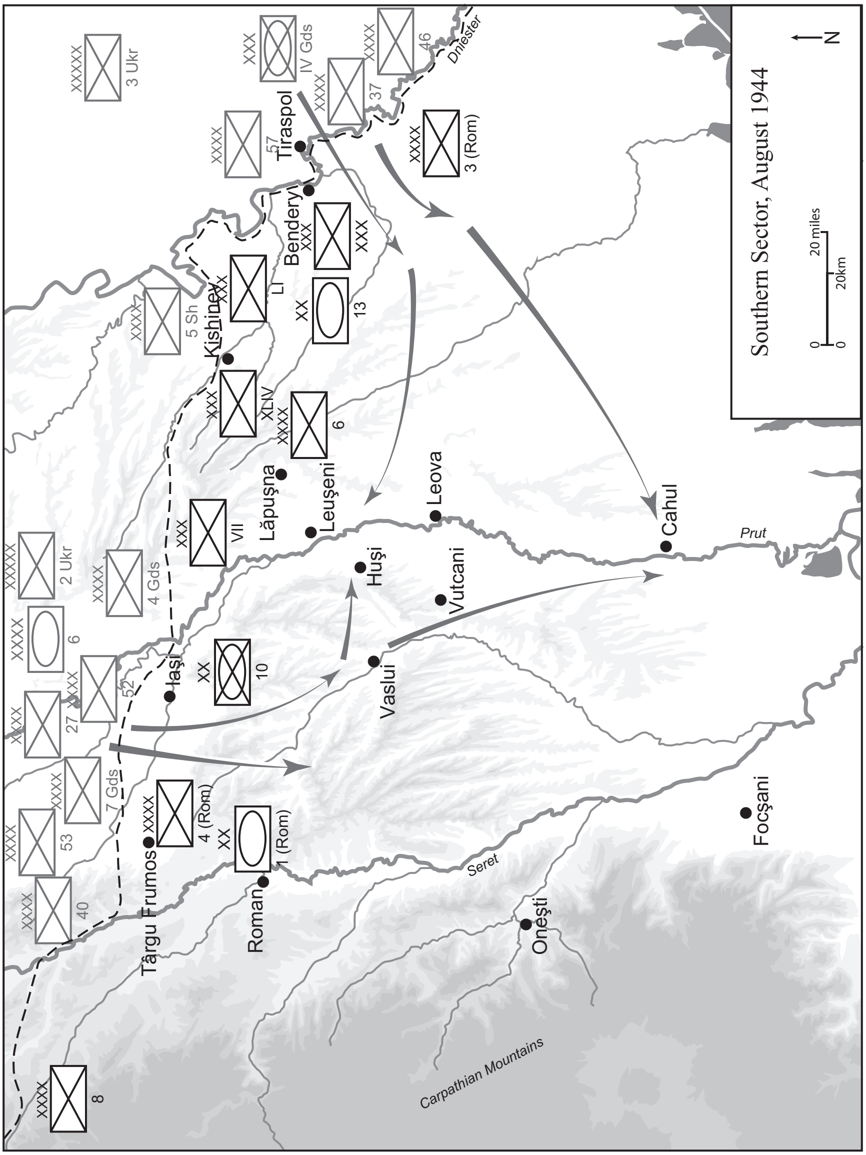
Army Group South Ukraine was now under the command of Generaloberst Johannes Friessner. The northern wing of his forces was known as Army Group Wöhler, and consisted of Wöhler's Eighth Army and the Romanian Fourth Army. For reasons that were largely political, this resulted in the southern wing, Army Group Dumitrescu, being controlled by the commander of the Romanian Third Army. General Petre Dumitrescu had commanded his Third Army since the beginning of the war, including during the period when the Red Army broke through his lines as part of the encirclement of the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad, and he now had at least nominal command of both his army and that of the neighbouring German Sixth Army. In reserve behind this sector was 13th Panzer Division, while Wöhler had 10th Panzergrenadier Division and the Romanian 1st Armoured Division available. The overall situation was an eerie reminder of the eve of the Stalingrad encirclement: the German Sixth Army stood in a salient, with its flanks protected by the Romanian Third and Fourth Armies.

In addition to giving some – belated – attention to training in order to improve the combat performance of the Romanians, the Germans attempted to integrate their units as closely as possible with German formations. In the First World War, the repeated failures of the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire led to the increasing use of German units alongside those of their allies in order to improve their resilience, and a similar policy had been adopted by Army Group South Ukraine. But the disintegration of Army Group Centre in the face of *Bagration* resulted in many of the German divisions that were held in reserve behind the front line – often behind Romanian units – being dispatched north to try to repair the huge holes torn by the Red Army. Without such close German support, the resilience of Romanian units once more became a cause for concern. The events of the summer had come in quick succession: firstly, the Western Allies had successfully landed troops in Normandy; secondly, *Bagration* had resulted in the near-complete collapse of Army Group Centre; thirdly, the Lviv-Sandomierz Operation had driven back Army Group North Ukraine; and finally, the assassination attempt against Hitler had shocked the Germans and their allies to the core. Inevitably, the result was a general sense of pessimism in Army Group South Ukraine. The defences hadn't been tested since the fighting earlier in the year, but the respite was surely coming to an end. Inevitably, the professional soldiers had considered a withdrawal to a better defensive position along the line of the Carpathians; equally inevitably, Hitler refused. The result was that for much of the front, the Prut River, running close behind the front line, posed a potentially serious obstacle should the Red Army attack – in the event of a retreat, there was a danger that the German and Romanian units would find themselves pinned against the river. On the eve of the Soviet offensive, German staff officers considered the problem and took steps to ensure that the bridges over the river were in good order and that small detachments were available to hold the crossings and to prevent any panic around them.

It was now standard practice for the Red Army to make local attacks at company or battalion strength immediately before an offensive; these 'reconnaissances in force' helped identify strongpoints in the defences and as has already been described sometimes led to the main attack being committed early to take advantage of an unexpected weakness. In order to avoid alerting the Germans to the precise location of their planned attack, the commanders of both Fronts ordered a series of such attacks in the week preceding the offensive at a wide variety of locations, many of them far from the intended points of assault. Almost all of these probes were defeated by the Germans and Romanians, but they largely served their purpose in preventing the Germans from getting any clarity about Soviet intentions. On 19 August, German intelligence noted an unusual increase in road traffic immediately behind the front line during the morning, followed by an ominous silence. Clearly, a major attack was imminent. During the evening, there were local attacks in the two assault sectors; all were repulsed by the defenders.

On 20 August, the massed artillery of the two Soviet fronts opened fire before dawn. On many occasions, the use of massive barrages by the Red Army had been relatively ineffective, but as with almost every aspect of military practice, lessons had been learned. Careful reconnaissance had identified key positions and these were heavily hit, along with lines of communication, supply dumps, and the locations of headquarters units. There were also some new innovations in artillery use in the second half of 1944. Diagonal lanes through the bombardment area were kept clear of shelling, allowing Soviet infantry to start moving forward obliquely towards the defences even before the end of the bombardment.

The first blow fell on the right flank of Army Group South Ukraine, deliberately targeted at the seam between the Romanian Third Army to the south and the German Sixth Army to the north. Supported by ground attack aircraft, the troops of 3rd Ukrainian Front's Thirty-Seventh and Forty-Sixth Armies struck hard against two Romanian formations, 4th Mountain Division and



Southern Sector, August 1944

XXXXX
3 Ukr
XXX
IV Gds
XXXX
46
XXXX
37
XXXX
57
XXXX
3 (Rom)
Tiraspol
Bendery
Dniester
XXX
XXX
XXX
LI
XX
13
XXXX
5 Sh
Kishinev
XXX
XLIV
XXXX
6
Lăpuşna
Leuşeni
Leova
Cahul
Prut
XXX
VII
XXXXX
2 Ukr
XXXX
4 Gds
XXXX
6
Huşi
Vutcani
Vaslui
XX
10
XXXX
52
Iaşi
XXXX
27
XXXX
7 Gds
XXXX
4 (Rom)
XX
1 (Rom)
XXXX
53
Târgu Frumos
Roman
XXXX
40
Seret
Focşani
Oneşti
XXXX
8
Carpathian Mountains
0
20 miles
0
20km
N

21st Infantry Division, and rapidly made deep penetrations. Despite all of the preparations of the Germans and Romanians, the defenders retreated rapidly in growing disorder, but for the moment a breakthrough was prevented. By the end of the day, the Soviet forces had gained about six miles (10km) of ground. A little to the northwest, the southern flank of Sixth Army also came under heavy pressure. In this sector, the defences were manned by the German XXX Corps and here, too, the attackers gained a similar amount of ground; only around the town of Bendery – now the Moldovan town of Bender – did the defences remain firm, on the shoulder of the Soviet attack. All local reserves had already been committed and the defenders deployed 13th Panzer Division in a counterattack. The Germans claimed that the Romanians retreated without firing a shot, but had this genuinely been the case, it seems probable that the Red Army would have penetrated far deeper. The German counterattack ran straight into the advancing Soviet units and made no progress at all.

The northern attack, by 2nd Ukrainian Front, was made by Seventh Guards Army, Twenty-Seventh Army and Fifty-Second Army, on a front running from the Seret River on the west to Iaşi in the east. Here too, the attackers achieved early successes and by midday large elements of Sixth Tank Army were ordered to move forward in order to exploit the attack. It wasn't just Romanian units that retreated – the German 76th Infantry Division to the northwest of Iaşi was also forced to pull back, and 10th Panzergrenadier Division, held in reserve to the south of Iaşi, hurried forward to try to restore the situation. At the same time, the Romanian 1st Armoured Division was ordered to deal with the central part of the Soviet attack.

At this stage of the war, this division consisted of a tank regiment, two motorised infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, a 'special motorised group' that served both as a reconnaissance unit and as combat engineers, and an anti-tank battalion. Its commander was Brigadier General Radu Korne, and he had organised his troops into three groups: one consisting of the tank regiment and special motorised group; one consisting of the two motorised infantry regiments; and the third consisting of the artillery. In total, the division had 48 German-made Pz.IV tanks and 22 StuG.III assault guns, and a small number of Romanian-made TACAM T-60 tank destroyers, and was reinforced by a German battalion of assault guns. In principle, this constituted a substantial force, but in order to give his motorised infantry regiments some armoured support, Korne assigned 14 of the assault guns to their battlegroup, thus weakening the main armoured battlegroup. As they advanced, the tanks of 1st Armoured Division became separated from the special motorised group. Pressing on towards the village of

Padu Iloaiei, the leading tank company ran into the first elements of Sixth Tank Army, which had advanced through the ranks of the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army.

Many Germans – including the liaison officer with 1st Armoured Division – claimed that when they encountered the Red Army, the Romanians put up no resistance, either turning their guns away from the Soviet tanks or deliberately firing over them. During the Cold War, it served the interests of the Soviet Union to make no contradiction to the German view – in that era, Romania was part of the Warsaw Pact, and Soviet orthodox historiography portrayed the advance of the Red Army into Eastern Europe in 1944 and 1945 essentially as a liberation of the working people of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Balkan states from German control. In this context, the myth that the Romanian soldiers colluded with the Red Army to defeat the evil Fascists was a convenient one. Pliev – the commander of the Horse and Mechanised Group that helped recapture Odessa – was sent south with his units to support the drive into Romania, and he later wrote:

> On our way south, we picked up a pile of newspapers at one of the railway stations … I remember how greedily we read about the events taking place in the south and how earnestly we discussed them. I was particularly interested in a statement by the USSR Commissariat for Foreign Affairs [the Soviet government's foreign office] concerning the events in Romania. The Soviet government reiterated its statement originally made in April 1944 that the Soviet Union did not intend to acquire any part of Romanian territory, and that it considered that it must restore the independence of the country in collaboration with the Romanians to free it from Nazi occupation. The statement called for Romanian troops to cease hostilities against the Soviet Army and to turn their weapons against the Nazis …
>
> It should be stressed here that the Soviet government statement of 2 April 1944, inspired by the concept that the Romanian people themselves should decide the fate of their country and ensure the democratic path of its development, had a great influence on the strengthening of anti-war and anti-Fascist sentiments in Romania. Commenting on this statement, the underground organ of Romanian patriots, *Romania Libera*, said: 'The decisive moment has come. We cannot wait any longer. The Romanian people must take their fate in their own hands and fight for a way out of the war.'[8]

As will be described later, the Romanians did eventually turn against the Germans, but this statement is more than a little misleading. Moldova or Bessarabia had previously been part of Romania before the Soviet Union pressured Romania into assigning the territory to the Soviet Union, and arguably the post-war boundaries of Romania cemented this annexation. And of course, it was entirely in keeping with the post-war Soviet narrative that Romania's Communist Party should be portrayed as having played a leading part in turning the Romanian people against Germany; the reality was that regardless of their political allegiances, the citizens of the war-weary nation were desperate to find a way out of the war.

With the end of the Cold War, Romanian writers began to unpick the myth that from the outset of the Soviet assault in August, Romanian troops refused to fight, and their accounts of the battle in which the Romanian 1st Panzer Division engaged the advancing Soviet armour describe a fierce tank battle that continued for several hours. These accounts seem more likely than the previous point of view – as was the case to the south of Tiraspol, if the Romanians had genuinely put up no resistance, the Red Army would surely have advanced much faster.[9] Eventually, flanking attacks forced the Romanian armour to pull back during the evening; the infantry group from the division also ran into advancing Soviet troops and was eventually driven back towards the south.

The limited reserves available to Army Group South Ukraine were almost fully committed – only the leading elements of 10th Panzergrenadier Division had seen action immediately to the west of Iaşi, but the Romanian 1st Armoured Division and 13th Panzer Division had made their intervention without the hoped-for success. The Red Army, by contrast, still had plentiful reserves. On 21 August, the assaults resumed on both fronts. The German and Romanian divisions facing 2nd Ukrainian Front to the west of Iaşi had put up variable levels of resistance on the first day, but on the second day all of them were fully in retreat. The Soviet XVIII Tank Corps reached and crossed the high ground running from east to west immediately south of Iaşi, where defensive positions had been constructed, and was ordered to push on towards the southeast into the rear of the German Sixth Army. At the eastern flank of the Soviet assault, Fifty-Second Army drove into Iaşi from the west, while 10th Panzergrenadier Division struggled to hold back the Soviet units attempting to push on towards the south, dispatching a battlegroup to try to intercept XVIII Tank Corps. Further west, the Romanian 1st Armoured Division fell back slowly towards the town of Roman, clashing from time to time with Soviet tanks and truck-mounted infantry, steadily losing tanks through breakdowns and combat.

The Soviet successes in the north were growing, but the attack by 3rd Ukrainian Front south of Tiraspol produced even greater results. The Romanian Third Army was driven south in growing confusion and although the northern shoulder of the Soviet penetration continued to be held up, a substantial gap now existed between the southern flank of the German Sixth Army and the Romanians to the south. Increasingly frustrated by the resistance of the German XXX Corps around Bendery, Gagen, commander of Fifty-Seventh Army, threw his second echelon into the battle with little result other than further heavy casualties – in this sector at least, German defences proved to be every bit as obdurate as Hitler and others might have wished. But XXX Corps' successful defence was increasingly irrelevant given the widening gap to the south, and Tolbukhin ordered his armoured exploitation forces to move forward to exploit the breakthrough. The success of the German defence to the north created some local difficulties – VII Mechanised Corps found that the roads on which it was meant to advance were still choked by infantry units, and as a result it took all day for the armoured unit to reach its start line – but further south, IV Guards Mechanised Corps had a far easier time. During the afternoon, the three brigades of Zhdanov's corps passed the leading Soviet infantry units and began their exploitation, advancing essentially into open space.

On 22 August, the battle continued to unfold. The Romanian 1st Armoured Division defended the city of Roman, but was forced to withdraw to the west as the day progressed, as it was being bypassed by Soviet units and was in danger of isolation. The various battlegroups of 10th Panzergrenadier Division were able to prevent Soviet armour from turning east into the flank and rear of the German Sixth Army but could do nothing to stop the continuing Soviet exploitation towards the south, and there were no other reserves available to intervene. Towards the end of the day, the leading units of Sixth Tank Army reached and drove past Vaslui and towards Huşi, motoring almost unopposed in the corridor of land between the Seret and Prut Rivers. At the same time, 3rd Ukrainian Front's exploitation also continued, and IV Guards Mechanised Corps – which had prepared from the outset to follow a flexible course as the operation unfolded – was ordered to turn to the northwest, i.e. towards the approaching units of 2nd Ukrainian Front. Other Soviet motorised units turned south towards the Black Sea coast, effectively cutting the line of retreat of the Romanian Third Army.

The encirclement of the German Sixth Army was now imminent. At the headquarters of Army Group South Ukraine, Friessner had been requesting a withdrawal closer to the Carpathians for several weeks, largely because he regarded the front line as practically inviting the Red Army to try to encircle Sixth Army. Hitler had repeatedly refused, and Friessner now took matters into his own hands. The former commander of Sixth Army, Maximilian de Angelis, had been reassigned to take command of Second Panzer Army in Yugoslavia, and replaced by General Maximilian Fretter-Pico, a long-serving veteran of the fighting in the southern sector of the Eastern Front. In the aftermath of the Stalingrad encirclement, his XXX Corps gathered together fragments of retreating units and ad hoc rear area formations to create *Armee-Abteilung Fretter-Pico*, and played an important part in preventing the complete collapse of the German front line during the winter of 1942–1943. Now, he found himself in command of an army that bore the same name as the formation that was destroyed at Stalingrad after Soviet attacks on the Romanian armies on its flanks led to his encirclement. After receiving permission from Friessner to commence a withdrawal, he ordered his units – from south to north, XXX Corps, LII Corps, XLIV Corps and VII Corps – to start pulling back to an intermediate line, while they sent strong units to secure the crossings over the Prut.

The next day – 23 August – would prove decisive. On the battlefield, the thrust from the north into Sixth Army's rear was now led by V Guards Tank Corps, and the only unit contesting its progress was a small battlegroup consisting of perhaps a battalion of infantry and ten German tanks. As the Soviet forces approached Huşi, they encountered stiffening resistance from the German 10th Panzergrenadier Division and elements of 76th and 79th Infantry Divisions, holding up progress, but the roads running towards the Prut from the west were now in Soviet hands. The southern breakthrough continued to make effective progress and IV Guards Mechanised Corps moved towards the Prut from the southeast; by the end of the day, its brigades had taken up blocking positions astride Sixth Army's lines of retreat to the southwest. The encirclement might not be physically complete, but any escape route was now tenuous at best.

The biggest developments on 23 August occurred away from the battlefield. Negotiations between King Michael's representatives and opposition groups, led by the Romanian Communists, reached a conclusion. Antonescu was summoned to the royal palace, where Michael instructed him to take immediate steps for Romania to leave the Axis and thus sever its ties to Germany. Antonescu refused, and was promptly arrested by the palace guard. His government was dismissed, and troops loyal to the king took control of key government and administrative buildings in Bucharest; General Constantin Sănătescu, a former cavalry officer who had served on the Eastern Front before becoming Marshal of the Royal Palace in 1943, became the new premier. That evening, King Michael made a radio broadcast to his nation, declaring a ceasefire and asking the people of Romania not to resist the advance of the Red Army. As soon as a ceasefire agreement was ratified, Romania would actively join the Allies and would fight against Germany.

Hitler immediately ordered the creation of a Romanian government-in-exile based around pro-German elements that were outside Romania, but the realities of the battlefield confounded any realistic option of restoring Axis control. There might have been doubts about the willingness of Romanian troops to fight against the Red Army prior to this date, but any resistance now effectively came to an end, giving the Soviet forces an almost free hand to drive on to their objectives. Formal recognition of Romania's change of allegiance would come on 12 September, after which Romanian troops would fight alongside Soviet soldiers against the Germans; despite this switch, over 130,000 Romanians remained prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, where many would die before they could return home. Antonescu was handed over to the Romanian Communists, who in turn passed him to the Soviet authorities when they arrived. He was taken to Moscow, where he was eventually imprisoned in Lubyanka Prison and interrogated about the German-Romanian alliance and Romanian involvement in the Holocaust. At one stage during these interrogations, he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide.[10] After the war, he was sent back to Bucharest and prosecuted on a variety of charges. He was executed in 1946.

On 24 August, the two Soviet pincers encircling the German Sixth Army established firm contact, completing the ring around the German divisions. The various rifle corps of 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts marched along dusty roads in the summer sunshine to strengthen the encirclement, and a second link-up by Soviet forces near Cahul created a second encirclement west of the Prut, enclosing 76th and 79th Infantry Divisions and 10th Panzergrenadier Division. Immediately, Fretter-Pico and Friessner tried to organise a breakout – there was no point in awaiting the arrival of an outside relief force, because no such outside forces existed. The best hope was for the two encirclements to try to establish a link near Huşi, and then attempt to escape towards the south or west. The four corps of Sixth Army had already dispatched battlegroups towards the Prut, and these now began to engage the Soviet units moving to strengthen the encirclement. There were several fierce clashes, forcing the Red Army to commit further reserves to try to block the German attacks, but the biggest problem faced by the Soviet forces proved to be one of command and control. The boundary between the two Fronts had been dictated in advance, and was now interpreted in a rigid manner. Advancing from the north, Fourth Guards Army inadvertently crossed the boundary to the east of the Prut. Tolbukhin complained that it was stopping him from advancing with Fifth Shock Army; *Stavka* backed him, ordering Malinovsky to pull back Fourth Guards Army and deploy it west of the Prut. It would take two days for the rifle corps of Fourth Guards Army to complete this redeployment, and despite Tolbukhin's protests his leading troops were not in position quickly enough to prevent the encircled Germans from taking advantage of their respite. Large numbers of German troops reached the Prut, moving through the area where Fourth Guards Army had been positioned, and were able to reach the western pocket. But attempts by Sixth Army to fight its way south had a different outcome. Here, XXX Corps made some initial progress but the advance rapidly ran out of steam. In any event, with the Romanian Third Army now in the process of surrendering in its encirclement on the Black Sea coast, there was little prospect of an attack towards the south reaching safety.

Everywhere across Romania, there was growing chaos. Romanian troops began to take control of airfields, forcing the Luftwaffe to make hasty evacuations. Attempts to detain German units in Bucharest led to fighting between the two sides, and the intervention of Stuka dive-bombers added to the confusion. In the encirclement, communication between the different elements of the trapped German divisions rapidly broke down as the Red Army compressed the perimeter. One of the encircled units was *Korps Abteilung F*, made up of the remnants of 62nd and 123rd Infantry Divisions. A battalion commander later recalled the attempts to reach the pocket on the western side of the Prut, using three captured tanks:

> Control of army, corps and division broke down completely. The division ordered me to march towards the Prut at Leuşeni via Lăpuşna. I had to pass through Legănesti, where I would run into the Russians. I immediately reported to the division that the Russians had occupied the town.
>
> I had to drive them out of the town. From prisoner interrogations, I discovered that the Russians had already taken and occupied Leuşeni and Lăpuşna with strong armoured units … The attack began at 1900 [on 23 August]. Major Scheid's attack broke down and his men began to drift away. At midnight the division was ordered to capture Lăpuşna in the early morning with the remnants of the Field Replacement Battalion, the division combat school, and Major Scheid's retreating units, and then press on to the Prut.
>
> I succeeded in breaking into the eastern part of Lăpuşna three times, but was driven out each time by Russian tanks, destroying my three T-34s with direct hits. My heavy mortar company, equipped with Russian 82mm weapons, was silenced by the fire of anti-tank guns. Our 162nd Artillery Regiment, which had been giving useful fire support for our attack, came under fire from aircraft, artillery and anti-tank guns. A brutal five-hour battle left us completely exhausted, and a few survivors gathered in a large cornfield, where I was wounded. Major Scheid, who had joined me during the battle, was killed next to me. At dark, with about

> 60–70 men from the division, from all branches, we crossed the hill to another cornfield. Here I found Generalmajor [Louis] Tronnier [the division commander] and Major von Üchtritz, and about 500 men from the division. We assembled all of the stragglers and agreed to try to break through the Russian positions during the night to reach the Prut.[11]

Üchtritz and many of the men in his group managed to cross to the west bank; other similar groups were overwhelmed by the Red Army and destroyed or forced to surrender. Fighting continued east of the Prut until the end of August. Elements of 10th Panzergrenadier Division and 13th Panzer Division managed to capture crossings over the Prut and held them for as long as possible, but communications difficulties made it almost impossible to direct other German units to the bridges. Eventually, the German armoured units were forced to fight their way out, taking with them the bulk of 76th Infantry Division.

Fretter-Pico was now in the encirclement west of the Prut with a considerable force gathered around him. On 27 August, he ordered a breakout via Vaslui towards the southwest, where the Soviet XLVIII Rifle Corps from Fifty-Second Army was in a blocking position. Like infantry units of both sides, the divisions of XLVIII Rifle Corps were far from full strength and the bulk of the Germans rapidly broke through towards Vutcani, while a smaller group managed to slip past Vaslui towards the west. Large elements of 2nd Ukrainian Front had pressed on towards the south and several divisions were now ordered to turn back to prevent the Germans from escaping. After its laborious redeployment, Fourth Guards Army was also finally approaching the area and Malinovsky ordered its two rifle corps to Vaslui. Carrying their wounded with them, the Germans continued to push towards the southwest and reached the Seret River on 30 August. In order to block them, Malinovsky recalled XXIII Tank Corps from the south, sending it into position west of the river. Over the next few days, the soldiers crossed the Seret by improvised means but ran into XXIII Tank Corps east of Oneşti. In heavy fighting, most of the German units were overwhelmed and destroyed. Groups of soldiers of up to company strength managed to slip through to the Carpathian foothills.

Fretter-Pico was one of those who escaped; as had been the case in early 1943, he found himself commanding an eponymous *Armeegruppe* of remnants of both Sixth and Eighth Armies until the end of the year. In 1945, he was assigned to take part in the court martial of General Walter Fries, who was charged with retreating from the Vistula contrary to orders; Fries was acquitted, and Fretter-Pico ended the war as commander of a German military region. Some regarded him as an unsuccessful commander. Pliev, for example, was particularly scathing when Malinovsky gave him an outline of German forces in the region:

> 'Again, we're facing Sixth Army!' I exclaimed.
>
> 'Yes indeed, the very same one that was destroyed at Stalingrad, leading to three days of official mourning across all of Germany; the same one that we defeated in Western Ukraine with the energetic participation of your Horse and Mechanised Group. And now it will try to hide behind the eastern Carpathians.'
>
> 'Who commands the army now?' I asked.
>
> 'General Fretter-Pico, the same Fretter-Pico who commanded a corps of Sixth Army in Ukraine and so ineptly and humiliatingly had to bury his men in the fields of Western Ukraine.'
>
> What an amazingly 'lucky' general, I thought. Each new defeat brought him another, higher appointment. During the fighting in Ukraine, when our cavalry and tanks appeared in his operational rear, he bombarded the divisions under his command with a stream of conflicting orders and directives, resulting in panic. Everyone was confused, including himself. And now, it turned out, we would meet him again on our way to the fields of Hungary.
>
> Well, I was sure that this time his troops would be no luckier than they were in Western Ukraine.[12]

This is an unfair and inaccurate summary. Like Karl-Adolf Hollidt, who was one of his predecessors in command of Sixth Army, Fretter-Pico was highly skilful at welding together disparate groups of stragglers and survivors and turning them into functional combat formations, and he proved his worth repeatedly during the fighting in the winter of 1942–1943. Pliev may have felt that Fretter-Pico's orders during the fighting west of the Dnepr led to confusion, but the reality was that Sixth Army escaped destruction and managed to escape to the Dniester, and it is difficult to see how anyone could have done better. His promotion to high command seems to have been a realistic reflection of his organisational and defensive skills.

The rest of the Iaşi-Kishinev Operation was little more than exploitation. The Romanian Third Army, pinned to the Black Sea Coast, laid down its arms and began to reorganise in order to join the Allies against Germany. On the last day of August, the Red Army reached Bucharest, and the Romanian troops in the city obeyed King Michael's orders not to take any hostile action against them. Immediately, a delegation of Romanian officials travelled to Moscow, where a formal armistice was declared on 12 September; the terms of the agreement were effectively imposed by the Soviet Union, and included Romanian acceptance of having to pay reparations, the repeal of Antonescu's anti-Jewish laws, and the repression of Fascist politicians. Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, which had been ceded to the Soviet Union before the war but then reclaimed by Romania after the invasion of the Soviet Union, were returned to Soviet control. Before the end of the war, 15 Romanian divisions saw service alongside the Red Army against Germany, and a further 120,000 Romanian soldiers were killed or wounded.

Romania wasn't the only country to be knocked out of the Axis by the events of late August. Bulgaria had successfully avoided sending troops into the Soviet Union and although it declared war on both Britain and the USA as part of the Axis, it insisted on neutrality with regard to the Soviet Union, as large parts of Bulgarian society were strongly pro-Russian. By late 1943, American and British bombers had attacked Sofia and other cities and there was a growing anti-government partisan movement in the western and southern parts of Bulgaria. The following year, there were attempts to negotiate Bulgaria's exit from the war, with the hope that British and American troops would be deployed in the country to prevent the Germans from seizing control. In late August 1944, after the fall of Antonescu, the Bulgarian government declared its exit from the war and demanded the departure of German military personnel. Parts of Greek Macedonia had been given to Bulgaria by Germany, and Bulgarian troops were deployed in this region and the adjoining parts of Greece; they were now hastily ordered home.

Just a few days later, Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front crossed the border between Romania and Bulgaria. The government in Sofia now declared war on Germany in the hope that this would prevent a Soviet occupation, but there were no direct links between the Bulgarian government and Moscow, and – unsure of Bulgaria's true intentions – Stalin declared war on Bulgaria. There was widespread unrest in Bulgaria at this time with workers in key industries like coal mining already on strike, and the partisans began to take control of many smaller cities and towns. Late on 8 September, the Fatherland Front – a coalition of left-wing groups, led by the Communists – seized power in Sofia. Fighting between the Fatherland Front and troops and police loyal to the previous government continued for a few days, but Bulgaria, too, was no longer part of the Axis.

Army Group South Ukraine was now disbanded, and a new Army Group South was created. Friessner was appointed its commander, but he was rapidly falling out of favour with Hitler. He had been promoted to high command in the hope that he would be able to deliver the obdurate, dogged defence that Hitler demanded, and his repeated requests for permission to withdraw ultimately led to his dismissal in December. It was the end of his military career. After spending much of the rest of his life to helping organise and run a welfare association for former soldiers, he died in 1971.

The Iaşi-Kishinev Operation was a great success for the Red Army. It was unusual in that it was one of the few occasions that the Soviet Union sustained fewer losses than its enemies: a total of about 67,000 Soviet soldiers were recorded as killed, wounded or missing, whereas Romania lost 33,000 killed or wounded and 170,000 taken prisoner, and Germany lost a total of about 150,000 men. In addition to the elimination of the Romanian order of battle, Germany lost its Sixth Army, and Eighth Army was badly mauled. Even if the front line could be brought to a halt through a combination of Soviet exhaustion, terrain difficulties and the approaching winter, the final defeat of Germany was now merely a matter of time.

CHAPTER 14

THE APPROACHING ENDGAME

The year 1944 saw great setbacks for the Third Reich. It was a second year of almost unbroken defeats, as a result of which the front line came ever closer to Germany. In 1943, there had been a burst of optimism in March when Manstein managed to restore the front line along the Donets River and recaptured Kharkov and Belgorod, but the failure to break through at Kursk was followed by constant withdrawals and setbacks. In 1944, matters were far worse. Almost all of the territories gained in the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 were lost, and the city of Memel – now the Lithuanian city of Klaipėda – was besieged on the Baltic coastline. Army Group North was isolated in the Courland peninsula in Latvia, and for a brief period the Red Army crossed the eastern border of East Prussia and advanced to the village of Nemmersdorf.[1] In the central region, the Wehrmacht was defending the line of the Vistula, with Soviet forces within striking range of Warsaw, and a little to the south Konev's troops continued to mass in the bridgehead at Sandomierz and Baranów, in preparation for a drive to the west. And in the south, all of Ukraine, including the territories seized from Romania before the war, were back in Soviet hands. The penetration at Nemmersdorf was driven back across the border and Model and Saucken managed to coordinate a highly skilful series of battles to defeat Rokossovsky's armour to the east of Warsaw, but the reality was there for all to see: the Red Army was poised on the very frontiers of the Third Reich, full of confidence after a long string of unbroken victories. Final vengeance for *Barbarossa* was only a matter of time.

In every respect, the Red Army had come a long way since those dark days of 1941 when the Wehrmacht seemed unstoppable. During 1944, the front line moved from the Dnepr to and beyond the Dniester and the Vistula, a distance of over 300 miles (484km). But the year also saw the continuing evolution of the Soviet armed forces into an increasingly effective weapon. Every operation was analysed in detail within a few months so that lessons could be learned in time for the next attack. Writing in 1985, David Glantz described this evolution:

> In 1944, after three years of bitter and costly struggle, the Red Army began reaping those battlefield victories which would ultimately culminate in the destruction of the German Army. Those three years represented a harsh school of experience for the Red Army during which the Soviets received and absorbed a detailed education in the art of war at the hands of Europe's most experienced and proficient army.
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> The first year of that education produced near collapse in the Red Army as it was forced to absorb the shock of blow after German blow at a cost of a huge expenditure in human lives. During that year the Soviets by virtue of the attrition of war weeded through their large and inexperienced officer corps in search of commanders who could produce a modicum of success on the battlefield. At the same time the Soviets offered up for sacrifice their large and cumbersome force structure, replaced it with an austere substitute, and began the arduous process of rebuilding a modern force structure in the teeth of a deadly war. The pragmatic, adaptive, and often brutal approach to waging war on the part of the Soviets resulted in the survival of the Red Army and the Soviet state as well.
>
> The second year of war saw the Soviets begin testing new force structures and doctrinal concepts appropriate for the employment of that new force. The Red Army of 1942 ambitiously attempted to seize the initiative from the Germans but finally was forced to recognise the realities of the situation and again resume a strategic defensive posture – a posture from which the Soviets emerged only in November 1942 at Stalingrad.
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> During the Stalingrad counteroffensive, which was conducted by a partially reorganised Red Army led by an improving command cadre, the Soviets seized the initiative from an overextended German Army and threatened to use that initiative to produce collapse in the ranks of their opponents. The fact that the German collapse did not occur despite the continuous Soviet offensive thrusts in the winter of [1942–]1943 clearly indicated that the Red Army had more to learn before it could resume its victorious march westward. To those Soviets who doubted this fact, the German counteroffensive in February and March 1943 in [Ukraine] made it abundantly clear.
>
> The sobering lessons of early 1943 created a new mood of patience on the part of the Soviets, a patience reflected in Soviet actions during the summer of 1943 as

> Soviet armies deliberately waited to parry the expected German offensive at Kursk. Meanwhile, the Soviets invested immense time and effort in rebuilding their force structure, manning it with competent officers, and developing doctrine suited to the necessities of conflict on the Eastern Front.
>
> The Soviet efforts in the summer of 1943 produced concrete results. The German defeat in the Kursk operation spelled an end to any German hope for conducting future successful offensives and began an almost certainly unalterable process of improving Soviet fortunes and eroding German strength. Already in late 1943 that process was clear as Soviet forces pushed German armies back to the Dnepr River line. By November 1943, in an indication of things to come, Soviet forces breached that physical if not psychological barrier – the Dnepr River.
>
> During 1944 the Soviets reaped the rewards that their policies of 1943 almost foreordained. In a positive vein the painstaking improvements made by the Soviets in 1943, based in large measure on the exploitation of war experiences, combined with the mobilisation of ever-larger forces to place a crushing weight on German defences. Moreover, Soviet mastery of sound strategic, operational, and to some extent tactical military techniques deprived the Germans of the ability they had previously possessed to deal with a more numerous but somewhat artless foe. Increased Soviet production of war materiel, in particular the major objects of ground war primarily tanks and artillery, supplemented by Allied aid in war materiel, accelerated that trend toward ever greater Soviet victories.
>
> As a result of these conditions the year 1944 found the Soviets victorious in operation after operation. Even more significantly, each operation produced a Soviet victory of ever-larger scale involving ever more disastrous German losses. Amidst these large-scale Soviet strategic and operational victories, the Germans – by showing a desperate tenacity – continued to display glimpses of what had been in the earlier years.[2]

It should be added that this process of evolution inevitably included setbacks. In addition to Manstein's recovery in March 1943, Zhukov wasted huge resources in the failed Operation *Mars*, intended to eliminate the Rzhev salient near Moscow – Soviet post-war historiography attempted to portray *Mars* as a huge deception attack to tie down German forces away from Stalingrad, but the reality is that the Red Army committed greater resources to *Mars* than it did to the far more successful operations at Stalingrad and along the Don. Despite the chastening setbacks in March 1943, the transition to watchful waiting at Kursk was also not straightforward; Stalin repeatedly questioned the ability of the Red Army to defeat such a powerful German armoured assault.

Nonetheless, 1944 saw the maturing of several Soviet military trends. In the encirclements at Kirovograd and Korsun, the Red Army struggled to make the most of its success and to destroy the encircled units; by the summer, the swift crushing of XIII Corps east of Lviv and the dismemberment of Sixth Army in eastern Romania ensured that the survival of a body of German troops to the rear of the advancing Red Army would not be a hindrance. Logistic difficulties were addressed by repeated attention to ensuring adequate supply lines and by permanently attaching logistic units to mobile formations. Cooperation between ground and air forces improved throughout the year, though it remained short of the level of cooperation in the German or Western forces. And attention to engineering support ensured that damaged and disabled vehicles and weapons were returned to service as quickly as possible, allowing high-tempo operations to continue for longer periods than had previously been possible.

There were numerous times in 1943 when the German panzer divisions continued to demonstrate their striking power, but one of the key developments of 1944 was that while German armoured units continued to excel at encounter battles – the panzer divisions thrown into the gaping hole torn in Army Group Centre during *Bagration* encountered and smashed Soviet units that were numerically larger than them on several occasions, particularly to the east of Warsaw – they repeatedly failed to achieve even local breakthroughs. In his attempts to reach the Korsun encirclement, Manstein concentrated a very large proportion of Germany's armoured strength, but failed to advance a relatively short distance. The Red Army continued to evolve and perfect its use of anti-tank guns to defeat German armour, and a repeated feature of every German armoured attack was the manner in which these defensive units brought the panzer divisions to an abrupt halt.

These were the fruits of the continuous learning process that had already begun before the end of 1941. The process continued to and beyond the end of the war, with particular attention on the areas where the Red Army (which was renamed the Soviet Army in 1946) saw room for improvement. The encounter battle – where units of the opposing armies run into each other on the battlefield and then fight an improvised engagement – was, as already mentioned, an area of weakness, but Soviet doctrine after the war identified the factors that improved the likelihood of success. Good reconnaissance, rapid deployment from the line of march, pinning attacks to deny the enemy freedom of manoeuvre, exploitation of open flanks, and the swift use of overwhelming firepower became key features of Soviet training. By the mid-1970s, the Soviet

Army viewed the improvements it had made as so great that an encounter battle became the preferred means by which Soviet armoured units expected to overcome their NATO opponents.[3]

While the fortunes and prowess of the Red Army improved steadily through 1944, those of the Wehrmacht declined at almost the same rate. Germany was coming to the end of its resources, and rebuilding its broken divisions was taxing the manpower of the nation to the limit – men who had previously been excused military service on the grounds of age or medical problems were now drafted into the ranks. German industry actually peaked in terms of military production in the autumn of 1944, providing a last burst of equipment to replace the weapons and vehicles lost in the constant retreats, but this was at a price. Stockpiles of key minerals – tungsten for armour-piercing rounds, molybdenum for steel alloys, copper for brass cartridge cases – were running low. The impact of British and American bombing was also being felt, reducing the capacity of German factories to continue manufacturing equipment. And the perennial problem of the German war effort – a shortage of fuel – continued to worsen, particularly following the loss of Romania's oilfields around Ploesti.

The strategic situation for Germany was now catastrophic. Ever since the creation of Germany in 1871, an abiding fear of German military commanders was the prospect of a two-front war. In an attempt to produce a solution to this, Alfred von Schlieffen, the chief of the general staff in the last decade of the 19th century, proposed an operation that came to bear his name, which would see minimal German forces defending in the east while an attempt was made to encircle and destroy the French in the west. He expressed considerable doubts whether the German Army had the strength or mobility to execute his plan, but in the absence of any other solution, it was adopted in 1914. When this plan failed to deliver a successful outcome, the German Army attempted to hold the line in the west while driving back the Russians in the east, in the hope that it would then be possible to switch forces back to the west for a decisive blow at Verdun or elsewhere. In the Second World War, the swift fall of France while Germany was at peace with the Soviet Union appeared to eliminate the threat of a two-front war – Britain might remain undefeated, but after the Battle of Britain, there was little prospect of an invasion across the English Channel in either direction at that stage of the war, and the Wehrmacht turned east in the expectation of defeating the Red Army by the end of 1941.

From the summer of 1943 onwards, it was inevitable that the British and Americans would – sooner or later – create a 'second front' in the west and that

Germany would therefore once more face the dreaded two-front war. Even before the Normandy Landings, the bombing campaign by the Western Allies was inflicting huge damage upon German cities, necessitating the diversion of substantial fighter resources to the west by the Luftwaffe, at a time when the Soviet Air Force was becoming increasingly powerful in the east. The concentration of aircraft development and construction on fighter planes exacerbated the pre-existing obsolescence of much of Germany's bomber fleet. The sheer scale of the Eastern Front meant that aircraft such as the Stuka, which would be very vulnerable to attack by the numerous British and American fighters that might be expected in the west, could still provide useful service in the east, attacking and withdrawing before fighter cover could intercept the German bombers. But as 1944 wore on, Soviet fighters became increasingly capable of intercepting such attacks, and German soldiers on the ground repeatedly described heavy Soviet air attacks with little or no intervention by the Luftwaffe's fighters.

As has already been described, the constant arguments between Manstein (and other generals) and Hitler in 1943 and the first months of 1944 essentially came down to differing and incompatible views on how to deal with the growing reality of a two-front war. Manstein and many other generals believed that, through mobile operations where German tactical skill remained superior to that of the Red Army, it might still be possible to defeat the Soviet forces repeatedly and grind them down to a point at which either a stalemate would exist, or better still the Soviet Union might be persuaded to come to terms. Hitler on the other hand increasingly feared the threat from the west and resolved to adopt stubborn defence in the east while concentrating sufficient forces in the west to deal a deadly blow to the coming invasion of Europe. His calculation was that if the long-awaited British and American invasion could be defeated, there was every likelihood of a prolonged reprieve from having to fight a land war on two fronts – allowing more divisions to be sent east in order to defeat the Soviet Union.

How realistic was either option? The years after the war saw the development of a general narrative that Manstein and other Wehrmacht officers were prevented from implementing a potentially successful strategy by Hitler's interference, and that the Führer's demands for stubborn defence in the east were impossible to implement. The latter argument may well be true, as the length of the Eastern Front would always give the Red Army the option to concentrate its attacks where it chose, whereas the Germans would have to maintain strong defences everywhere, which was surely beyond their resources. Hitler placed great hope on the past performance of men like Model and Schörner, but this was not always appropriate. Model fought a series of highly skilful defensive battles in Army Group Centre in 1942 and 1943, making very effective use of locally held reserves to mount swift, punishing counterattacks when his lines were attacked by the Red Army; in 1944, he was able to some extent to replicate this performance as he was rushed from one looming disaster to another. Whilst Army Group North Ukraine defeated the first Soviet attempt to advance through Târgu Frumos and Iaşi, the circumstances of the fighting were such that Manstein, too, would have achieved the same outcome. Schörner had a reputation for being a strong supporter of Hitler, but perhaps his real value was that he was very skilled at using his influence with Hitler to secure approval for withdrawals, such as the final evacuation of the Crimean peninsula.

It seems therefore that Hitler's demands for a determined defensive strategy in the east were almost certainly undeliverable. Nor was his hope of dealing a killing blow to any western invasion likely to succeed. The Soviet leadership might have complained repeatedly about the length of time it took the Western Allies to initiate their invasion, but the long gestation period brought with it a far greater likelihood of success. The air forces of the Western Powers had complete control of the sky and were trained to provide a level of close cooperation with ground forces that the Germans had not faced in the east. The Germans had a generally low opinion of the Sherman tanks that were widely used by the British and Americans – they were sometimes referred to as 'Tommy cookers' due to their tendency to catch fire, and even American crews sometimes referred to them as 'Ronsons', a reference to an advertisement from the 1920s for the cigarette lighter that was guaranteed to light 'first time, every time'. However, many of these Shermans were armed with sufficiently heavy guns to make them quite capable of destroying the best German armour, and whilst they might have been slow, the heavily armoured British Churchill tanks were far harder to kill, and the Cromwell tanks, powered by a specially developed version of the Rolls Royce Merlin aircraft engine, were formidable opponents for any German tanks. It seems unlikely that even if the Wehrmacht's generals had been given a free hand, they would have been able to concentrate sufficient armour to mount a victorious assault on the beachhead at Normandy without attracting the deadly attention of Allied aircraft, and even if the attack had then been made, the defenders would probably have prevailed – the failure of panzer divisions to achieve breakthroughs in 1944 that had been almost routine in earlier years has already been mentioned.

But the strategy that Manstein and others favoured was also unlikely to succeed. The Red Army routinely deployed powerful anti-tank formations in the path of German armoured counterattacks, successfully bringing them to an abrupt halt, and the operations that Manstein regarded as Germany's only possible salvation would have placed even higher demands on the Third Reich's already inadequate fuel supplies. The reality must surely be that by the beginning of 1944, the war was already lost for Germany. By the end of the year, this reality was abundantly clear for all to see.

Despite this, the narrative that developed in the west after the war, partly due to the rapid development of the Cold War and growing hostility towards the Soviet Union, resulted in western writers looking more favourably upon the men who had fought against the Red Army on the Eastern Front, particularly in view of their undoubted early successes. For the senior German commanders, the practice of blaming all of Germany's failures upon Hitler became commonplace, and a distorted picture of the war developed: the highly skilled and superbly led German forces were ultimately defeated by sheer weight of numbers. It is striking that the memoirs of men like Manstein, Balck and Mellenthin rarely if ever accept any personal blame for the setbacks that their subordinate formations suffered. All such defeats were either due to Hitler's interference, or (particularly in Balck's accounts) due to the failure of subordinates. Rarely, if ever, did German officers attribute their defeats to the growing skill of their opponents. In the 1980s, as the forces of NATO continued to evolve their strategy and tactics in the face of the perceived Soviet threat, many of these former Wehrmacht commanders took part in seminars, discussing their performance against the Red Army and repeating the same orthodox view: the Soviet forces won battles by crushing the German defenders with overwhelming numbers of tanks, artillery and soldiers.

Such a viewpoint is overdue for reassessment. As this narrative has shown, the Red Army showed far more rigour and consistency in trying to learn lessons from both successes and failures. At every level, both organisation and tactics were analysed and improved, and previous improvements evaluated to assess whether they had delivered the expected results. The huge casualties suffered by the Red Army meant that – regardless of the memoirs of German officers – it was impossible for Soviet forces to sacrifice men in the same manner as they had done in the past. The forcible recruitment of men from the reconquered territories has been described on several occasions in this account, and the sometimes deliberate use of these relatively untrained soldiers in fighting that was anticipated to be costly was seen as a brutal but expedient way of preserving the ranks of veteran soldiers from such losses; far more effective, however, was the increasing attention to the structure of infantry units. Much of the early restructuring of the Red

Army concentrated on the armoured units and artillery, but throughout 1944 there were several improvements to rifle divisions, steadily increasing their firepower. By the end of the year, almost every division had mortar units and other support formations as part of its establishment, and additional resources were available at corps level. However, the terrible losses that had been sustained in earlier years meant that in some cases, these support units were badly understrength, or existed only on paper.

The casualties suffered by the Red Army throughout the war were terrible by any standard. By the end of the war, over 34.4 million men and women had entered its ranks, and it had lost 6.3 million killed in action, 0.5 million killed by illness, and 4.5 million missing (most of them captured by the Axis forces). Such losses would have lasting effects on Soviet society after the war and at first glance, the staggering numbers reinforce the post-war narrative developed by the Wehrmacht veterans of an enemy that threw men at the Germans with complete disregard for casualties. But several points should be remembered. Firstly, casualties amongst most armies, especially in infantry units, were high, particularly when attempting to attack. The Western Allies committed 1.4 million men to the invasion of Normandy, rising to a fraction over 2 million by the end of August 1944, and suffered 226,000 killed, wounded or taken prisoner. By 1945, British casualties had reached the stage that previously exempted groups of workers such as miners and dockers were being considered for conscription. Model's infantry on the northern flank of the Kursk bulge suffered losses similar to those experienced in the First World War when they attempted to prise apart the Red Army's defences. The second point is that ultimately, the Soviet Union had little choice. This was not a war that could end with a peace conference of the diplomats of the nations involved. Hitler had made clear from the onset that it was a conflict between two irreconcilable worldviews. Either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union would prevail – there could be no compromise. Political thinking in the closing decades of the preceding century had been increasingly influenced by the concept of 'social Darwinism', in which nations would compete against each other with a resultant 'survival of the fittest'. The *Rassenkrieg* ('racial war') that Hitler unleashed upon the Soviet Union in 1941 can be seen as a further manifestation of this view. Faced with such a conflict, in which defeat would see the extinction of the Soviet Union and the massacre of its people, there was no option but to fight the war to the bitter end, regardless of the losses that this would involve.

There can be little doubt that the Red Army of late 1944 was quite capable of dealing with the Wehrmacht on equal terms. The Soviet success in the

Iaşi-Kishinev Operation was, according to the narrative that developed in the western world in the 1950s and 1960s, caused by the collapse – or deliberate collusion – of Romanian forces. Undoubtedly, many Romanian units did disintegrate when they came under attack – but the same was true of many German units. And whilst the Germans belatedly made an effort to improve the training of Romanian troops during the summer of 1944, Germany as a state did little or nothing to address the widespread resentment towards the Germans in Romania. Food and oil continued to be seized without payment, let alone any payment for items appropriated in the past. It is probably true that, even if the will to make such payments had existed, Germany was past the point where it could afford to do so, but if that is the case, it reinforces the view that the war was irretrievably lost.

By the end of 1944, this simple reality must have been clear to all but the most die-hard believers in Hitler's mantra of *Endsieg* ('final victory'). In that context, the reaction of the German military to the attempted assassination of Hitler is interesting. Writing after the war, Balck was characteristically unequivocal:

> In my opinion there was never the slightest possibility of the coup succeeding. No combat units, which were the only ones that really mattered, would have fought against Hitler at that time. The conspirators themselves must have understood this … Nor were there favourable conditions in the field of foreign policy. Although the Anglo-Americans were delighted to see treasonous internal events occur, they had no intention of abandoning their policy of unconditional surrender and the consequent political and economic destruction of an undesirable Germany. They fought against Germany, not against National Socialism.[4]

There are several inaccuracies here, and given that Balck was writing this over 20 years after the war – when the western powers had helped rebuild Germany via the Marshall Plan and had prevented West Berlin from coming under Soviet control by staging the Berlin Airlift – he must surely have known that his concluding sentences were wide of the mark. Although the Allies had stated in the Casablanca Declaration that they would prosecute the war until they secured unconditional surrender, they also made clear that their war was against the Nazi regime and specifically not against the German people. There was a clear implication that if the Nazi regime were overthrown, there might be room for a negotiated end to hostilities. Allen Dulles, head of the Office of

Strategic Studies (OSS, the predecessor of the CIA) in Switzerland, had no doubts about this:

> [The Casablanca Declaration] was merely a piece of paper to be scrapped without further ado if Germany would sue for peace [but] Hitler had to go.[5]

There is evidence that this view was held in some circles in the German military; Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of German military intelligence, was actively negotiating with Allied representatives via Istanbul to explore this possibility. Whilst Balck may not have been aware of this in 1944, it seems inconceivable that he was still ignorant about this in the 1970s when he wrote his memoirs.

But Balck is not alone in being critical of those who attempted to overthrow Hitler. Many officers at all levels condemned Stauffenberg and the other conspirators for breaking their oath of allegiance to Hitler. Historically, the German Army had given its oath to the Kaiser, and after the fall of the Hohenzollerns in 1918 this oath was transferred to the constitution of the new German republic. In 1934, this was replaced by an oath pledging allegiance to Adolf Hitler, the leader of the German people. The intention of this new oath, which was the idea of General Werner von Blomberg, the defence minister, was to tie Hitler more closely to the army, but the reality of course was quite the opposite – it was the army that found itself tied to Hitler. Nevertheless, many regarded the oath as inviolable and refused to contemplate any action against Hitler, but would have been prepared to act against other aspects of the Nazi regime if he were to die. To an extent, it can be argued that this criticism by other officers of the conspirators as 'oath breakers' is at least partly due to a sense of something approaching resentment, that others were prepared to take steps that they shied away from taking themselves. It should be remembered that Hitler, too, took an oath when he assumed office, promising to uphold the welfare of all Germans. By 1944, there can be little doubt that he had manifestly broken the terms of his oath.

And of course, regardless of the oath, the Wehrmacht was not Hitler's personal army. It belonged to the entire German nation, and there was surely an overriding duty to the German people that was greater than the oath of allegiance to Hitler. That oath was surely weakened by the divergence between what was in the best interests of the German people and what was perhaps in the best interests of Hitler. Officers had a further responsibility to their men, as Oberstgruppenführer Paul Hausser wrote after the war. In early 1943, Hausser was commander of II SS Panzer Corps, which Hitler had ordered to hold Kharkov at all costs, but rather than allow his well-armed divisions to be destroyed in an avoidable encirclement – at this stage of the campaign, these divisions represented the only German armoured units in the entire sector that were remotely near their establishment strength – Hausser ordered the abandonment of the city. This deliberate disregard of a direct order from Hitler nearly resulted in his dismissal, and he remained under suspicion regarding his loyalty for the rest of the war, but Hausser had no personal doubts:

> If a subordinate thinks an order is wrong, he must report his opinion, justifying it and requesting an alteration. If the higher authority adheres to its decision, the subordinate must obey. If he believes that he cannot do so, he takes personal responsibility and must be prepared to answer for it. Whilst disobedience may be reported as an act of wilfulness, this overlooks the duty of a commander of men: responsibility for subordinate troops![6]

If such an attitude was correct with regard to local orders during a battle, it was surely also appropriate if officers believed that the war was going to end disastrously for their country.

The Wehrmacht started the war with considerable assets, and benefited particularly from having a corps of staff officers of exceptional quality and training. Balck wrote after the war that he questioned this view:

> Unfortunately, during both world wars nobody thought it was necessary to develop a system to test the performance of general staff officers in order to guide how they were evaluated, how they were assigned, and where and why they were successful or why they failed. The general staff officer can never become just a pure desk soldier with an automatic claim to the highest command positions. He must also be a good front-line leader with as many years of experience as possible. Part of the flaw in the system was the tendency to fill every possible key position with general staff officers. They all should have experience serving in the front line. Periodic administrative assignments are also quite useful for developing line officers.[7]

As has already been mentioned, Balck declined a transfer to the general staff, where his undoubted front-line skills might have benefited other staff officers, and he might have learned first-hand the difficulties that staff officers faced. Regardless of his opinion, there can be little doubt that the German general staff greatly enhanced the performance of the Wehrmacht. Most unit commanders established a close relationship with their chief of staff, allowing them to concentrate on evaluating information and devising solutions to the problems that faced them, while their staff officers carried out the painstaking detailed work to turn those solutions into reality. By the end of 1944, the high attrition rate of officers through a mixture of casualties and dismissal for failing to follow Hitler's instructions had led to significant changes. The officers of the general staff remained highly competent, but they had largely been deprived of the freedom of action that they required to put their competence to maximum effect. However, it would be wrong to assign all of their reduced effectiveness to Hitler's micro-management of the army. The reality of the conflict was that Germany's enemies were now completely in control of the pace and course of events, and the Wehrmacht could do little more than react to circumstances.

The commanders of the formations that fought each other in 1944 enjoyed differing fates. Model, Hitler's favourite fireman, ended the war in command of Army Group B in the west. He fell from favour after the failure of the German Ardennes offensive of December 1944. Encircled in the Ruhr in April 1945 and with his army group split into two, he rejected an American call for surrender of the entire army group, replying that he remained bound by his oath of duty to Hitler and that, as a German field marshal, he could not surrender. Hitler had declared the Ruhr to be another pointless fortress, with the added instruction that all infrastructure that might prove useful to the Allies after the war was to be destroyed. Model made little or no attempt to obey this last order; as Army Group B has been ordered to hold the Ruhr to the last man, he circumvented this by dissolving the army group. The oldest and youngest soldiers were discharged and the rest given permission to act for themselves – either to fight on, to try to break out, or to surrender. On 20 April, even as the Red Army fought its way closer to Berlin, Goebbels declared that the officers and men of Army Group B were traitors to the Reich. The following day, aware that the Soviet government intended to prosecute him for war crimes involving the murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians in areas under his command, and the forced deportation of workers to Germany, Model shot himself. He was never popular with his fellow officers, who regarded him as prone to foul language and bypassing the chain of command, often micromanaging his subordinates and showing little hesitation to criticise and humiliate those subordinates in public. Those very traits made him popular in the eyes of many ordinary soldiers, and his defensive battles with Army Group Centre were masterful demonstrations of what could be achieved if adequate resources were available. It is arguable that he was best suited to division or corps command rather than higher commands, but given his defensive successes, it is understandable why Hitler turned to him as the Red Army began to grind down the German defences.

Schörner was moved to take command of Army Group North in July 1944 and from there he moved to Army Group Centre, defending Czechoslovakia and parts of southern Germany. Hitler named him commander-in-chief of the army on 4 April 1945, but the communication difficulties in Germany at that time would have made it impossible for him to have any significant effect in this role. When his army group was encircled, he issued a typically uncompromising order:

> In these hard days, we must not lose our nerves or become cowardly. Any attempt to find your own way back to the homeland is a dishonourable betrayal of your comrades and your people, and will be punished.[8]

Given his consistently harsh treatment of those he deemed to be deserters – including groups of men who were in the rear area on their way to workshops to collect repaired vehicles, but had no written orders – and this last order to Army Group Centre, it is all the more striking that, wearing civilian clothes, he flew out of the final encirclement of his men in a small plane and landed in Austria. Here, he was captured by American troops. In 1951, the Soviet authorities charged him with war crimes committed in areas under his control. He was sentenced to 25 years' hard labour but was released to the East German authorities in 1954, and by them to the West German authorities four years later. He was then prosecuted for manslaughter of the men killed on his command for being deserters, specifically the case of a corporal who was hanged after being found asleep in the cab of his truck. He was sentenced to a further four-and-a-half years' imprisonment and was finally released in 1963. He lived in Munich in poverty until his death in 1973.

Erhard Raus, who commanded First and Fourth Panzer Armies during much of the fighting, was then transferred to take command of the wreckage of Third Panzer Army in the wake of *Bagration*. He too fell from favour after submitting accurate reports on the pessimistic outlook for his men. He surrendered to the Western Allies and was released in 1947. He died in his home city of Vienna in 1956.

Hermann Balck was sent to the west in September 1944 to take command of Army Group G in eastern France. According to his memoirs, he succeeded in slowing American and French advances towards the Rhine, but his failure to obey Hitler's orders to the letter contributed to his removal from this post and his return to the Eastern Front, this time as commander of Sixth Army, which had once more been re-created after its second destruction in the Red Army's Iaşi-Kishinev Operation. He was heavily involved in the failed German attempts to break through to the besieged garrison of Budapest. From here, he led his men back into Styria in Austria, where he surrendered to the Americans. After his release by the Allies in 1947, he was charged with ordering the unlawful shooting of an artillery officer in November 1944 after he was found drunk in his bunker. Balck's account of the incident in his memoirs showed that he had no doubts about his personal conduct:

> The commanding general of First Army, General von Knobelsdorff, called me one morning to report that an unbelievable mess had arisen in one of his divisions. The artillery regiment commander was utterly drunk and the division was at a standstill … when his division commander had him collected, the artillery commander was so drunk that he was unable even to stand unaided.
>
> … I had the facts checked by three independent chains of report – the command chain, the military justice chain, and the adjutant's chain. All gave the same result. The command's judge advocate recommended a death sentence.
>
> … I decided to use my authority and ordered a summary execution through command channels. It was a very difficult and agonising decision … [but] the German military code of justice covered this situation completely.[9]

Had Balck allowed the army's military justice system to proceed to convict and execute the officer, he would have been free of any personal blame, but his decision to order a summary execution was deemed illegal. He was released after serving half of a three-year sentence. He died in 1982.

Walther Nehring, who commanded both First and Fourth Panzer Armies for spells during 1944, was commander of XXIV Panzer Corps near Sandomierz in January 1945 when the Red Army commenced its great drive across Poland to the Oder. His corps was rapidly cut off, but with great resourcefulness he and his subordinates managed to escape to the west, moving their men mainly by night to avoid detection. He was released from captivity in 1948 and died in 1983.

On the Soviet side, most of those who commanded armies and Fronts in 1944 went on to hold high office in the Soviet armed forces after the war. Zhukov, the great hero of Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad, oversaw the final assault on Berlin, commanding 1st Belarusian Front. He was the first commander of Soviet occupation forces in Germany after the war, but Stalin perceived his popularity and military authority as a potential threat and in 1946 Zhukov lost his post as commander-in-chief of the Soviet Army. He was given a succession of relatively minor posts, and Lavrentiy Beria, head of the NKVD, repeatedly tried to find evidence that could be used against him. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Zhukov – who had been summoned back to Moscow from commanding the Urals Military District but had no opportunity to meet Stalin before the latter's death – became deputy defence minister. As Soviet officials manoeuvred to position themselves as Stalin's successor, Zhukov renewed his relationship with Nikita Krushchev; the two men had worked together during the Stalingrad campaign and Zhukov intervened twice with Stalin to save Krushchev from arrest. Working with others, the two men arranged a meeting at which Beria was arrested and brought before a military tribunal chaired by none other than Konev, at which the NKVD head was sentenced to death. In the years that followed, Zhukov enjoyed a brief resurgence, becoming defence minister, but even his erstwhile ally Krushchev came to fear his popularity and power and he was forcibly retired in 1957 – the announcement was made in Moscow while he was on a visit to Albania. He was briefly rehabilitated in 1965 and invited to watch the May Day parade in Moscow from the Lenin Mausoleum; he died in 1974.

Ivan Konev, perhaps the most politically astute of the Soviet commanders in this narrative, manoeuvred actively even before the end of the war for prominence. His 1st Ukrainian Front raced Zhukov's troops to Berlin in 1945 before being ordered to bypass the city to the south, and like Zhukov he held commands responsible for the occupied parts of Germany and Austria. He too experienced a decline in power, being assigned to distant military districts, but he returned to favour after Stalin's death. He became the first commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact before ending his career in 1962 as commander of Soviet forces in Germany. He died in 1973.

Rodion Malinovsky, who led 2nd Ukrainian Front in the second half of 1944, proceeded to take his troops through Transylvania to encircle Budapest. After the fall of the Hungarian capital, he led 2nd Ukrainian Front to Vienna and Brno and was then sent east to take command of the Transbaikal Front. He led this formation in the invasion of Manchuria, rapidly defeating the Japanese forces in the region in a campaign that lasted less than two weeks. He remained in the east and played a leading role in Soviet involvement in the Korean War. After Krushchev came to power, he was appointed commander-in-chief of Soviet ground forces and then replaced Zhukov as Defence Minister; in this role, he played a leading part in modernising Soviet forces. He died in 1967.

Fyodor Tolbukhin, commander of 4th Ukrainian Front, did not have a long career after 1944. At the end of the war, he commanded Soviet forces in the

Balkan region before becoming commander of the Transcaucasus Military District. He died in 1949 aged just 55.

By the end of 1944, the end was close. The coming year would see another huge Soviet operation that blew away the fragile front line along the Vistula and overran much of East Prussia before finally coming to a halt – more from logistic difficulties than German resistance – along the Oder River. And this would then be followed by the final assault in which the Red Army smashed its way into Berlin and exacted ultimate revenge on its foe. The battles of 1944 and the changes they brought to both sides paved the way for this final act. The men who commanded the Red Army during these battles would then play important roles in the development of the Soviet military in the decades that followed, a lasting legacy of the bitter combat across the western regions of Ukraine.

NOTES

PREFACE

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INDEX

Page numbers in **bold** refer to maps.

aircraft: Douglas A-20B Havoc 317–18
Akhtyrka 21, 22, 51
Alekseev, Maj Gen Vasily Mikhailovich 162
Allmendinger, Gen Karl 292, 312–13, 314, 319, 325
Angelis, Gen Maximilian de 243, 442
Annopol 419–21
Anthonissen, Gommaire 135
Antonescu, Marshall Ion 231, 252, 296, 298–99, 300
  and Michael I, King 430, 443, 444
Apostolovo 174, 175
armaments 20–21
Army Groups *see* German Army
Austria 402

Back, Genmaj Hans-Ulrich 149, 267
Bäke, Oblt Franz 79, 156, 166, 194, 203–4
  and *Wanda* 125, 147–48, 149
Balck, Gen Hermann 200–1, 202, 277, 464–65
  and *Bagration* 397–99, 404, 416, 421, 422–23
  and memoirs 458, 460, 461, 462
Balkans 32, 37, 331, 430–31
Bandera, Stepan Andrijowycz 178, 179
Baranov, Lt Gen Viktor Kirillovich 384, 402, 406, 412
Bashtanka 220
Bayerlein, Genlt Fritz von 60, 64–65
Belgorod 21, 22, 51
Bełzec 413
Berezivka 227, 229
Beria, Lavrentiy 466
Berlin 467
Bessarabia *see* Moldova
Betz, Ob Paul 315
Bittrich, Wilhelm 257–58
Black Sea 90
Black Sea Fleet 297–98, 317
Blomberg, Gen Werner von 36, 461
Bogdanov, Lt Gen Semen Ilyich 129, 132, 345
Bolsheviks 285, 288–89
Borczów 267–68
Bormann, Martin 403
Brandt, Ob Heinz 409
Breith, Gen Hermann 79, 112, 118, 121, 123
  and Hill 239: 154, 155, 158
  and *Wanda* 125, 132, 140, 149
Brese-Winiary, Maj Heinz von 88
Brest-Litovsk, Treaty of (1918) 178
Brinkmann, Vizeadm Helmuth 295
Britain *see* Great Britain
Brody 274–75
Bucher, Ob Wolfgang 142
Buczacz 270–71
Bulgaria 448
Büsing, Ob Otto 104–5
Busse, Genlt Theodor 85, 89, 98–99, 102–4, 112, 127

Canaris, Adm Wilhelm 461
Carpathian Mountains 184, 186, 417–18, 431–32
Casablanca conference (1943) 29, 409–10, 460–61
Catherine the Great, Tsarina 232, 285
Caucasus 109
Cherkassy-Korsun 73–75, 81–85, **86**, 87–91, 92–107, 109–21; *see also* Hill 239; operations: *Wanda*
Chernivtsi 249–50

Chevallerie, Gen Kurt von der 267, 270, 381
Chuikov, Col-Gen Vasiliy Ivanovich 212, 213–15, 219–20, 224, 226
  and Romania 343–44, 352–53, 354, 357
civilians 24–25, 46, 180, 232, 239–40
Cold War 17, 18, 380, 440–41, 458
concentration camps 24, 413
conscription 25
Cramer, Hptm Gerhard 155, 156
Crete 319–20
Crimea 27, 31–33, 36–37, 76, 285–90, 292–98, **291**, 300–19, 320–29
Czercasy 279, 281, 282
Czortków 269, 270

Debus, Heinrich 162
Degrelle, Leon 115, 159
Dnepr River 22–23, 25, 27–38, 49
Dniester River **185**, 186–99, 200–4, 205–9, 236–40
Dollfuss, Engelbert 402
Dolyna 418
Dorr, Hans 141
Dreckmann, Genlt Paul 340, 341
Drewes, Maj Wilhelm 282
Dulles, Allen 460–61
Dumitrescu, Gen Petre 436
Düntsch, Maj Harry 249–50

East Prussia 451, 467
Eastern Front 17–19, 456–57
Edelsheim, Maximilian Freiherr von 216, 351–52
Einem, Oblt Hans-Egon von 363
Eremenko, Gen Andrei Ivanovich 297–98, 302–5, 316–17
Estonia 374

Feig, Oblt 269
Fiebelkorn, Ob 165
Filipkowski, Gen Władysław 414, 415
'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) 24
First World War (1914–18) 267, 331, 374, 436, 459
  and armistice 410
  and Carpathian Mountains 186, 431
  and Hitler 39
  and Lviv 389, 415
  and Romania 298, 332–33, 434
Fischer-Treuenfeld, Karl von 258, 271, 278
'fortresses' 65, 182–83, 273–75

Franck, Hans 402–3
Frank, Oblt Heinz-Werner 143
Freissner, Genob Johannes 436, 442, 444, 448–49
Fremde Heere Ost (*FHO*) 432–34
Fretter-Pico, Gen Maximilian 443, 444, 446–47
Frey, Albert 248
Friebe, Genmaj Werner 275, 276, 277, 398–400
Fries, Gen Walter 446
Fritsch, Gen Werner von 36
Frölich, Genmaj Gottfried 398

Gagen, Lt Gen Nikolai Aleksandrovich 343, 442
Galanin, Lt Gen Ivan Vasileevich 339
Galicia 184, 205, 402–3
Gehlen, Oblt Reinhard 432, 433–34
German Army 21–23, 27, 36, 436–37
  and air strikes 383
  and atrocities 53
  and attitude 409–10
  and Crimea 286–87
  and failures 454, 455, 458
  and Hitler 461–63
  and losses 168–69, 273, 315, 426, 459
  and Red Army 25–26
  see also *Waffen-SS*
German Army (units):
  First Panzer Army 34–35, 36, 202–3, 245–48, 250–51, 254–55, 266–67
  Second Army 109
  Fourth Panzer Army 34, 67–68, 202
  Sixth Army 344, 354–56, 437, 439, 442–43, 444–47
  Eighth Army 35, 236–37, 362–63
  Seventeenth Army 36–37, 289, 290, 292, 309–10, 318–19, 326–28
  III Panzer Corps 119, 120, 121, 123, 129–31, 132–33, 139–40, 142–43, 160–61
  V Corps 292–93, 310, 311, 313, 314
  VII Corps 84, 94, 112
  XI Corps 84, 85, 102, 112, 115
  XIII Corps 386, 406–7, 412, 418
  XXIX Tank Corps 90–91
  XLII Corps 84, 94, 102–3, 112
  XLVI Panzer Corps 80
  XLVII Panzer Corps 84, 85, 112, 120–21, 140
  XLVIII Panzer Corps 200

  LVI Panzer Corps 386–87
  LVII Panzer Corps 221–23
  LIX Corps 193
  Korps Abteilung C 407–8, 410
  Korps Abteilung F 445–46
  1st Panzer Dvn 124, 155–56, 183–84, 205–6, 248–49, 267–70, 410–11
  3rd Mountain Dvn 229–30
  3rd Panzer Dvn 55, 60–61, 63, 64–65, 67, 70, 71, 87, 88, 423–24
  6th Panzer Dvn 79, 193–94
  7th Panzer Dvn 200–1, 257
  8th Panzer Dvn 38
  10th Panzergrenadier Dvn 55, 57–59, 67
  11th Panzer Dvn 54, 61, 65, 89, 90, 92–93, 98, 99–100, 143–44
  13th Panzer Dvn 120
  14th Panzer Dvn 55, 58–59, 60–61, 63–64, 66–67, 88, 90, 91, 93, 124–25, 196–97, 237–38
  16th Panzer Dvn 79, 147–48
  16th Panzergrenadier Dvn 212–13, 215
  17th Infantry Dvn 357–58
  17th Panzer Dvn 79–80
  24th Panzer Dvn 112–13, 119, 126–29, 174–76, 214–15, 216–19, 221, 223–24, 241–42, 348, 351–52, 362–63
  50th Infantry Dvn 309, 327
  57th Infantry Dvn 37–38, 89
  72nd Infantry Dvn 88, 89, 91, 98, 142, 161
  88th Infantry Dvn 97–98
  106th Infantry Dvn 54
  198th Infantry Dvn 96–97
  282nd Infantry Dvn 54
  320th Infantry Dvn 54, 101
  376th Infantry Dvn 55, 67, 196–97
  389th Infantry Dvn 85, 87, 88–90, 91, 98, 112
  Grossdeutschland Dvn 63, 67, 68–70, 104–5, 198–99, 238–39, 346–48, 354
  26th Panzer Rgt 100, 104
  282nd Infantry Rgt 310–11
  Schwere Panzer Abteilung 501: 422–23
Germany 17–19, 455–56, 460–61
  and civilians 24–25
  and Crimea 286
  and materials 20–21, 370–71
  and Romania 332–33, 429–30
  and Transylvania 435
  and Ukraine 178, 179
  see also German Army; Hitler, Adolf
Gestapo 243
Gille, Brig Herbert 159, 167, 170, 279, 281, 282
Glantz, David 18, 452–53
Glässgen, Maj Heinz 104
Glemann, Hptm Hans-Joachim 422
Gneisenau Line 308
Gniloy Tikysh River 130–31, 133, 140, 143, 148, 151–52; *see also* Hill 239
Goebbels, Joseph 463
Gollnick, Gen Hans 80
Göring, Hermann 295
Gorodok 248–49
Goths 286
Graeser, Genlt Fritz-Hubert 417, 421
Great Britain 21, 205, 448, 455–56, 459
Grechkin, Lt Gen Aleksei Aleksandrovich 290, 292
Grechko, Col Gen Andrei Antonovich 417–18
Greece 448
Grigorev, Evgeni Grigorevich 163
Groddeck, Genlt Karl Albrecht von 341
Guderian, Genob Heinz 19–20, 193, 319

Harpe, Genob Josef 381, 382, 406
Hauffe, Gen Arthur 406–7, 411
Hausser, Paul 99, 258, 270, 461–62
Hell, Gen Ernst-Eberhard 84
Helmet Hill 356–57
Henrici, Gen Sigfrid 243
Hering, Gottlieb 413
Heydrich, Reinhard 286, 287
Hill 239: 152–70, 154–56
Hill 254: 354
Himmler, Heinrich 402–3
Hitler, Adolf 34, 39, 46, 170, 458
  and Angelis 243
  and assassination attempt 408–9, 410, 460
  and Cherkassy 113
  and conference 91–92
  and control 372, 373
  and Crimea 37, 289, 290, 295–96, 308, 311–12, 325, 328
  and Dnepr 22, 23, 58
  and Eastern Front 456–57
  and 'fortress' orders 65–66, 182–83, 273–74
  and German Army 461–62, 463
  and high commands 435–36
  and Hill 239: 159

  and Hube 272–73
  and Hungary 205
  and Jaenecke 318–19
  and Kamanets-Podolski 247, 250–52
  and Kursk 19–20
  and Lviv 414
  and Manstein 27–33, 71–72, 258–60, 261–62
  and Nikopol 49, 127, 128
  and Odessa 232
  and Romania 299, 444
  and Southern Bug 236
  and Soviet Union 459
  and Tarnopol 283
  and *Wanda* 133
  and *Werwolf* 76–77
Hiwi volunteers 324
Hohn, Ob Hermann 151
Hollidt, Genob Karl-Adolf 37, 220, 221–22, 243
Holocaust 24, 444; *see also* Jews
Horn, Ob Heinrich 167
Hörnlein, Genlt Walter 69
Horthy, Miklós 205
Hoth, Hermann 34
Hube, Gen Hans-Valentin 34–35, 71, 92, 121, 170, 272–73
  and Kamanets-Podolski 247, 250, 251, 254, 257
  and *Wanda* 130, 132–33, 139
  and Wenck 266
Hungary 204–5, 430, 434–35

Iaşi 334, **335**, 336, 348, 362, **364**, 366, 441
industry 20–21
Ingulets River 212–26
intelligence 74, 182, 432–34
Iron Guard 298–99
Italy 55, 381, 435

Jaenecke, Genob Edwin 36–37, 311–12, 318–19
  and Crimea 289, 290, 292, 295, 300–1, 308, 317
Jews 24, 77, 258
  and Bełzec 413
  and Crimea 285, 287–88
  and Galicia 402, 403
  and Hungary 204
  and Lviv 389–90, 415
  and Moldova 429–30
  and Odessa 232
  and Romania 298–300
  and Vinnitsa 199
Jezierzany 268
Jijia River 362–63
July Plot 260, 262, 408–9, 410, 461

Kaisergruber, Fernand 15, 16
Kállay, Miklós 205
Kamanets-Podolski 204, 205–6, 245–57, 266–72, 273
Kapitanovka 88–89, 90–91, 92–93, 98
Kästner, Oblt Robert 142, 147, 151, 161, 162
Katukov, Gen Mikhail Efimovich 77–78, 81, 420–21
Keitel, Marshal Wilhelm 92
Kerch peninsula 292–95, 303–7, 310–11
Kharkov 21, 22, 51, 461–62
Khilki 142, 151, 164
Kiev 25, 35, 49
Kirchner, Gen Friedrich 221–22, 223
Kirovograd 35–36, 50–51, 52–71, 54–55, 73–74
Kishinev 334, **335**, 336, **342**, 353, **355**, 361
Kleist, FM Paul Ludwig Ewald von 36, 262–63
Kleist-Schmenzin, Ewald von 262
Kluge, FM Günther von 260
Klyachkivsky, Dmytro 180
Knobelsdorff, Gen Otto von 355–56, 357, 358, 362, 366
Koch, Erich 263
Koll, Genmaj Richard 140, 155, 166
Köller, Hans 85, 164–65
Komarovka 134, 147, 151, 160
Konev, Gen Ivan Stepanovich 43, 50, 51–52, 74, 169, 466
  and Cherkassy 75, 81, 82–83, 85, 87, 89–91, 93, 98, 100, 101, 110, 111, 114, 119–20
  and Dniester 196–98
  and Hill 239: 152–53, 159–60, 162–63, 168
  and Kirovograd 59, 63, 65, 67–68, 71
  and Lviv 379–80, 382–83, 384, 394–95, 396–97, 399–400, 401–2, 406, 412, 414, 416–17, 418–19, 425–26
  and Romania 334, 336, 337, 339, 345–46, 352, 354, 361, 362
  and Southern Bug 206–8, 234–36, 238, 239
  and *Wanda* 144–47, 151

Konrad, Gen Rudolf 310, 314–15
Korfes, Genmaj Otto 137
Korne, Brig Gen Radu 439
Koroteyev, Gen Konstantin Apolinovich 363–64
Korsun-Shevchenkovsky *see* Cherkassy-Korsun
Kosakovskiy, Petr Aleksandrovich 324–25
Koshevoi, Maj Gen Petr Kirillovich 302, 305–6, 308–9, 312, 320–21, 322–23, 325
Kovel 279, **280**, 281–83, 381–82
Koveshnikov, Maj Dmitri Stepanovich 294
Kravchenko, Gen Andrei Grigorovich 84, 97, 98, 110, 111
Kreizer, Lt Gen Iakov Grigorevich 290, 309, 312, 321
Krivoy Rog 49, 52–53, 174–77
Krüger, Friedrich-Wilhelm 403
Kruhel 282–83
Kruse, Genmaj Kurt 167
Krushchev, Nikita 466
Kursk, Battle of (1943) 21, 27
Kursk salient 18, 19–20

Lake Peipus 374
Lammerding, Heinz 194
Lang, Ob Rudolf 87
Langkeit, Ob Willi 88
Lapland 38–39
Lascăr, Gen Mihail 300
Lasch, Karl 402–3
Lashchenko, Col Petr Nikolaevich 252–54, 278, 405
Latvia 451
Lelekovka 65–66, 67
Lelyushenko, Col-Gen Dmitri Danilovich 385–86, 390–91, 392, 404–5, 414
Lemberg *see* Lviv
Lex, Alfred 202
Lieb, Genlt Theodor 84, 94, 102, 113, 115, 170
  and Hill 239: 159, 160, 166–67
  and *Wanda* 135, 136
List, FM Wilhelm von 36
Lithuania 451
Loza, Dmitir Fedorovich 106–7, 149
Luftwaffe 115–17, 150, 154–55, 221, 426–27, 456
  2nd *Fallschirmjäger* Dvn 55, 56–57, 61, 68, 127–28
  Jagdgeschwader 52 Dvn 308
Lüttwitz, Gen Smilo Freiherr von 415
Lviv 375, 376, 380, 382–85, 389–92, **393**, 394–402, **401**, 403–8, **408**, 410–17
Lysyanka 102, 140, 143, 148, 150, 153–54; *see also* Hill 239

Mackensen, Gen Eberhard von 35
Makovchuk, Maj Gen Nikolai Matveevich 360–61
Malinovsky, Gen Rodion Yakovlevich 43–44, 211–12, 226, 232, 466
  and Romania 344, 345, 352, 353, 357–58, 361, 362, 365, 446
manganese mines 32, 33, 49
Manstein, Erich von 19, 22, 27–34, 46, 258–61
  and Busse 99, 103–4
  and Cherkassy 111, 112, 113, 118–19, 121
  and Crimea 286, 287, 288
  and Donets 240–41, 242–43
  and Hill 239: 152
  and Hitler 91, 92, 261–62
  and Hube 35
  and Hungary 204, 205
  and Kamanets-Podolski 246–47, 250–52, 254
  and Kirovograd 54
  and Soviet Union 456, 457–58
  and Ukraine 182–83
  and *Wanda* 127, 130, 133–34, 139, 151–52
  and *Watutin* 71–72, 77, 80, 81
Manteuffel, Genmaj Günther von 213, 346–48, 350–51
Manteuffel, Gen Hasso von 171
Marcks, Genmaj Werner 249
Maskirovka (deception) 377–81
Mattenklott, Gen Franz 84
Mauss, Gen Karl 200, 201
Medvin 121, 132, 133
Mellenthin, Ob Friedrich von 398, 416, 458
Melnik, Lt Gen Kondrat Semenovich 317
Melnyk, Andriy Atanasovich 178
Michael I of Romania, King 298, 300, 430, 431, 443
Mielec 421–22
Mieth, Gen Friedrich 348
Mikosch, Genmaj Hans 119, 157
military police 218–19
Model, FM Walter 259, 263–65, 278, 382, 457, 463–64

Moldova 429–30, 435, 440–41, 448
Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) 391, 429
Moltke, Helmuth von 72
Monyushko, Evgenii Dmitrievich 391–92, 424–25
Moskalenko, Col Gen Kirill Semenovich 395–96
Müller, Genlt Friedrich-Wilhelm 319–20
Mummert, Oblt Werner 88

Napoleon Bonaparte 73
Narva River 374
NATO 458
Nehring, Gen Walter 381, 382, 421, 465
Neindorff, Genmaj Egon von 275, 276, 277
Nicolussi-Leck, Karl 281–82
Nikolayev 220–21, 225
Nikopol 31–33, 49, 126–29
Normandy 381, 459
Novo Buda 142, 150, 151, 164
Novo-Poltavka 220
Novy Bug 219–20
Nuremberg trials 260–61

Odessa **228**, 231–34
Ohlendorf, Otto 287, 288
OKH (*Oberkommando des Heeres*) 435–36
Oktyabr 155–56, 160–61
Oktyabrsky, Vice-Adm Filipp Sergeyevich 297
OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) 435–36
Olgopol 222–24
operations:
  Adler (1944) 309–10
  Alphabet (1944) 229–30
  Bagration (1944) 376–87, 389–92, 394–402, 403–8, 410–27
  Barbarossa (1941) 286
  Freedom (1944) 14–16
  Katja (1944) 363, 364–65, 366
  Kutuzov (1944) 21, 374–75
  Margarethe (1943) 205
  Mars (1942) 41, 381, 453
  Overlord (1944) 381
  Polkovodets-Rumyantsev (1944) 21, 51
  Sonja (1944) 362–64, 366
  Uranus (1942) 27, 109
  Wanda (1944) 119, 121, **122**, 123–37, 139–52
  Watutin (1944) 71, 76–81, 77–78, 111–12
  Zitadelle (1943) 19–20
Otroschenkov, Sergei Andreevich 57, 106, 131, 134
OUN-B (‘Banderites’) 178–79, 180

pan-Slavism 430–31
partisans 258, 301, 315–16
Petrov, Gen Ivan Efimovich 290, 292–93, 295, 296–97
Pliev, Lt Gen Issa Aleksandrovich 211–12, 215–16, 218–19, 221–22, 224–27, 229–34
  and Romania 440, 447
Podu Iloaiei 337, 339, 363
Poland 24, 179–80, 182, 451
  and *Armia Krajowa* (*AK*) 413–14, 415
  and Lviv 389, 390–91
Polozkov, Maj Gen Vasily Iudovich 105
prisoners of war (POWs) 137, 315, 328, 411, 444
Prokhorovka, Battle of (1943) 51, 60
propaganda 169
Proshin, Lt Col Ivan Ivanovich 106–7
Proskurov 201, 202–3, 205–6
Prut River 186, 437, 445–46
Przemyśl 415
Pushkin, Lt Gen Efim Grigorevich 224

Racoviță, General Mihail 333
railways 24, 148–49
Raus, Gen Erhard 34, 71, 373–74, 381, 464
  and *Bagration* 399, 406, 407
  and fortresses 183, 274–75
  and Tarnopol 202, 252, 277
Recke, Genlt Heinrich 341
Red Army 14–16, 18–19, 21, 24, 40, 246
  and anti-tank formations 457–58
  and artillery 84–85
  and Cherkassy 75–76
  and Crimea 286–87, 290, 292–93
  and deception 377–81
  and Dnepr 22–23
  and Dniester 186–92
  and evolution 451–55, 458–60
  and German Army 25–26
  and Kirovograd 35–36, 55–56
  and Kursk 19–20
  and leaflets 136–37
  and local attacks 437, 439
  and losses 273, 371–72, 426
  and Malinovsky 43–44
  and Romania 331–32, 334, 336–37, 339–40, 431–32, 441–42

  and tactics 44–46, 423–25
  and Vatutin 41–43
  and vehicles 372–73
Red Army (units):
  First Tank Army 77–78, 79–80, 81
  Second Guards Army 321
  Second Tank Army 129, 235
  Fourth Guards Army 83, 90, 160, 234–35, 339–40, 444–45
  Fifth Guards Army 50, 51, 62, 340–43
  Fifth Guards Tank Army 50, 51–52, 60, 63, 82–83
  Fifth Shock Army 220, 225, 234, 344, 345, 352
  Sixth Tank Army 84, 94, 95, 143
  Seventh Guards Army 50, 51–52, 56–57, 63, 235
  Eighth Air Army 308
  Eighth Guards Army 212, 214–15, 343–44, 352–53, 357
  Seventeenth Air Army 226
  Twenty-Sixth Army 84
  Twenty-Seventh Army 117–18
  Thirty-Seventh Army 174
  Fortieth Army 84, 96–97
  Forty-Sixth Army 127
  Fifty-Third Army 50, 63
  Fifty-Sixth Army 295
  Fifty-Seventh Army 343, 345
  Seventieth Army 101
  IV Guards Cavalry Corps 211–12, 218–27, 229–34
  IV Guards Mechanised Corps 211–12, 218–27, 229–34
  V Guards Cavalry Corps 101, 114, 117, 144–45, 150–51, 235
  VII Mechanised Corps 52, 58–59, 62
  VIII Mechanised Corps 59–60, 63
  XVIII Tank Corps 63, 100–1, 105–6, 160, 162
  XIX Tank Corps 315–16
  XX Tank Corps 99–100, 106, 149
  XXIII Tank Corps 215
  XXXIV Guards Rifle Corps 360–61
  322nd Rifle Dvn 252–54
  20th Guards Mechanised Bde 208–9
  32nd Guards Tank Bde 309
Regele Ferdinand (ship) 326
Regina Maria (ship) 328
Reinhardt, Genlt Alfred 314
Ribbentrop, Joachim von 299
Richter, Joachim 279
Rokossovsky, Gen Konstantin Konstantinovich 375
Romania 37, 78, 239–40, 242, 298–300
  and ceasefire 443–44, 445, 447–48
  and Germany 332–33
  and Moldova 429–30, 440–41
  and oilfields 286, 289, 311
  and Red Army 431–32
  and Strunga Defence Line 333–67
  and Transylvania 434–35
Romanian Army 231, 232, 300–1, 436, 460
  and Crimea 295, 296, 313–14, 315–16, 317, 326
  Third Army 437, 441–42
  1st Armoured Dvn 439–41, 442
Roosevelt, Franklin D. 29
Rotmistrov, Col-Gen Pavel Alexeyevich 51, 52, 55–56, 57, 169
  and Cherkassy 90–91, 92, 100–1, 110, 111
  and Kirovograd 59–60, 62, 69–70
Rozdilna 230–31
Ruhr 463
Rundstedt, Gerd von 204, 260
Russia *see* Soviet Union
Russian Civil War (1917–22) 178, 232, 285, 286
Russkikh, Grigory Antonovich 56
Rybalko, Gen Pavel Semenovich 403–4
Ryzhov, Maj Gen Alexander Ivanovich 83, 90, 101

Samson, Lt Cmdr Titus 326
Sănătescu, Gen Constantin 443
Sandig, Ob Rudolf 154
Sandomierz 425, 426, 451
Sauckel, Fritz 263
Saucken, Genlt Dietrich von 398
Schell, Ob Otto 341
Schlieffen, Alfred von 455
Schmundt, Gen Rudolf 251
Schönfeld, Ob Carl-August von 277–78
Schörner, Genob Ferdinand 231, 265–66, 325, 457, 464
Schulz, Genmaj Adalbert 171–73
Schulz, Konteadm Otto 327
Schwab, Genlt Hugo 313–14
Schwerin, Genlt Gerhard Graf von 213
Sea of Azov 109
Selivanov, Maj Gen Aleksei Gordeevich 115, 151, 160

Semenov, Maj Gen Aleksei Ivanovich 364
Seret 268–70
Sevastopol 287, 311–18, 320–26
Shanderovka 134, 140–42, 152, 164–65
Shepetivka 171–73, 184, 186
Shirokoye 175–77
Shramenko, Stepan Trofimovich 315, 320, 323–24
Shtemenko, Gen Sergei Matveyevich 289–90, 377–78
Shumilov, Col Gen Mikhail Stepanovich 51–52, 63
Sicily 34
Siegel, Maj Hans 165–66
Sixt, Genlt Friedrich 309, 320
Sluzhba Bezbeky (SB) 182
Smirnov, Lt Gen Ilya Kornilovich 101
Smolensk 375
Sokolov, Lt Gen Sergei Vladimirovich 384
Sokolovsky, Gen Vasily Danilovich 404
Sokolsky, Maj Gen Alexander Kuzmich 303
Southern Bug River 51, 206–8, 226–27, 234–42
Soviet Air Force 456
Soviet Union 17, 18, 24–25, 433
  and Balkans 430–31
  and Crimea 289–90
  and Moldova 429
  and Romania 440–41, 444, 448
  and Ukraine 178, 180, 181–82, 199–200
  see also Red Army; Stalin, Joseph
Speer, Albert 20–21, 23, 33, 38–39, 370, 371
Speidel, Genlt Hans 98–99, 103, 112, 127, 130, 157
Stahl, Maj Paul 270, 271
Stalin, Joseph 19, 40, 74, 331, 465
  and Cherkassy 75, 81, 90
  and Crimea 286, 296–98, 303, 307–8, 328–29
  and Hill 239: 167–68
  and Konev 361
  and Lviv 384–85
  and Romania 429, 432
  and Rotmistrov 60
  and Ukraine 41, 42, 43, 44
  and Vasilevsky 173–74
  and *Wanda* 145–47
Stalingrad, Battle of (1942–43) 25, 27, 109, 137
  and Manstein 113, 130, 133–34
Staro Konstantinovka 194, 202
Stauffenberg, Klaus von 260, 408–9, 410, 461
Stavka 40–41, 51
Stemmermann, Gen Wilhelm 112, 114–15, 152, 158–59
  and Cherkassy 84, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93–94, 98, 102, 103,
  and *Wanda* 132, 133–36, 141
Stratievskiy, Issa Borisovich 163–64
Strunga Defence Line 333–67
Sudets, Lt Gen Vladimir Aleksandrovich 226
Sukhovorov, Lt Col Mikhail Ivanovich 312, 313

Tanaschishin, Lt Gen Trofim Ivanovich 215, 226, 227
tanks, German 104–5, 120, 143, 149, 371
  King Tigers 422–23
tanks, Soviet 45, 51, 69–70, 71, 84, 149
  IS-2: 350–51
  JS-1: 153–54
  SU76: 359–60
Târgu Frumos 337, **338**, 339, 346–47, **349**, 350–51, 352, 366
Tarnopol 200–1, 202–3, 252–54, 274, 275–78, 283
Tashlyk 114, **355**, 357
Tatars 285–86, 289, 328–29
Thomas, Gen Georg 23
Tippelskirch, Gen Kurt von 379
Tiraspol **342**, 343
Tolbukhin, Gen Fedor Ivanovich 44, 303, 307, 309, 316, 320, 321
  and post-war 466–67
  and Romania 361, 442, 444–45
Transylvania 434–35
Tresckow, Gen Henning von 29–30
Trofimenko, Lt Gen Sergei Georgevich 117, 160, 162
Turkey 32, 37
Tutarinov, Maj Gen Ivan Vasilevich 231

U-boats 46, 371
Üchtritz, Maj von 446
Ukraine 24, 25, 27–29, 46, 451
  and Lviv 389, 390
  and Malinovsky 43–44
  and nationalists 178–82, 391–92
  and Vatutin 41–43
  and war crimes 287–88
  and *Werwolf* 76–77
  see also Cherkassy-Korsun; Dniester River; Kirovograd; Vinnitsa
Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) 179–82

Uman 110–11, 199
United States of America (USA) 20, 21, 205, 455–56, 458
Unrein, Genlt Martin 59, 66, 67, 88, 237–38, 356

Vainrub, Maj Gen Matvei Grigorevich 224–25
Vasilevsky, Marshal Alexander Mikhailovich 40–41, 42, 181
  and Crimea 290, 307, 326
  and Krivoy Rog 173–75, 176–77
Vatutin, Gen Nikolai Fyodorovich 41–43, 49–50, 52, 178, 180–81
  and Cherkassy 82, 84, 94–96, 97–98, 102, 110, 111, 117–18
  and *Wanda* 129, 133, 146
Vinnitsa 80, 199–200
Vinograd 143
Vistula River 419–24, 451, 467
Vladimirsky, Vice-Adm Lev Anatolevich 297
Vlasov, Andrey Andreyovich 324
Vögtel, Max 202
Vormann, Gen Nikolaus von 60, 61, 62, 65, 66, 67
  and Cherkassy 84, 87–88, 101–2, 104, 112–13, 118–19, 120–21
  and Hill 239: 157–58
  and *Wanda* 140, 144
Voroshilov, Marshal Kliment 307

Wächter, Otto von 402, 403
Waffen-SS 14–16, 17–18, 53
  Einsatzgruppe D 287–88
  Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler (*LSSAH*) 80–81, 123–24, 129, 139, 148–49, 194–95, 271–72
  SS-Das Reich 184, 186–92, 194, 202, 254–56
  SS-Florian Geyer 279
  SS-Frundsberg 257, 258, 270–71, 278
  SS-Galizien 402–3, 407, 410
  SS-Germania 279
  SS-Hohenstaufen 257–58, 270–71, 278
  SS-Sturmbrigade Langemarck 192–93
  SS-Wallonien 115, 135, 147, 150–51
  SS-Wiking 83, 84, 85, 89, 91, 93, 94, 114, 135, 158, 165–66, 279
Wagener, Ob Carl 373
Waldenburg, Ob Siegfried von 363
Waldenfels, Genmaj Rudolf Freiherr von 193
war crimes 17, 260–61, 263, 287–88, 464
weaponry, German 37, 38–40, 70
weaponry, Soviet 40, 93
Wehrmacht *see* German Army
Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of 73
Wenck, Genmaj Walter 97, 102–3, 112, 156, 266
  and *Wanda* 130, 133, 139
Werwolf ('Werewolf') headquarters 76–77
Wietersheim, Genlt Wend von 98, 99–100, 157
Wirth, Christian 413
Wöhler, Gen Otto 35, 54, 57, 152, 157–58
  and Cherkassy 85, 89, 94, 98, 101, 120–21
  and Romania 337, 346, 362, 366, 436
  and *Wanda* 127, 132, 135–36, 144
Wrangel, Pyotr Nikolayevich 285

Yankelevich, Efim Abramovich 52–53, 58, 61–62
Yugoslavia 263

Zaitsev, Col Vasily Ivanovich 385–86, 404–5, 411
Zakharov, Boris Petrovich 153–54, 307
Zdanovich, Col Gavriil Stanislavovich 358–59
Zehner, Gen Wilhelm 243
Zeitzler, Gen Kurt 33, 247, 259
Zhadov, Gen Alexei Semenovich 52, 58, 173, 340–43, 362, 419
Zhdanov, Maj Gen Vladimir Ivanovich 227
Zhitomir 25, 38, 200, 415
Zhmachenko, Lt Gen Filipp Feodosevich 97
Zhukov, Marshal Georgi Konstantinovich 40–41, 42–43, 52, 178, 361, 465–66
  and *Bagration* 376
  and Cherkassy 74–75, 76, 81–82, 109–10, 114
  and Hill 239: 152–53, 162, 166, 167–68
  and Kamanets-Podolski 246, 247
  and Rotmistrov 59–60
  and Shepetivka 171, 173
  and UPA 180–81, 182
  and *Wanda* 126–27, 133, 136, 137, 142, 145–47
Zhurzhintsy 147, 153, 156, 160, 161–62, 165
Zonov, Arseniy Niklaevich 359–60
Zvenigorodka 110–11, 113, 143–44

Plates

Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group South. (Photo by Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Ferdinand Schörner, commander of Army Group South Ukraine. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Hans-Valentin Hube, commander of First Panzer Army. (History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)

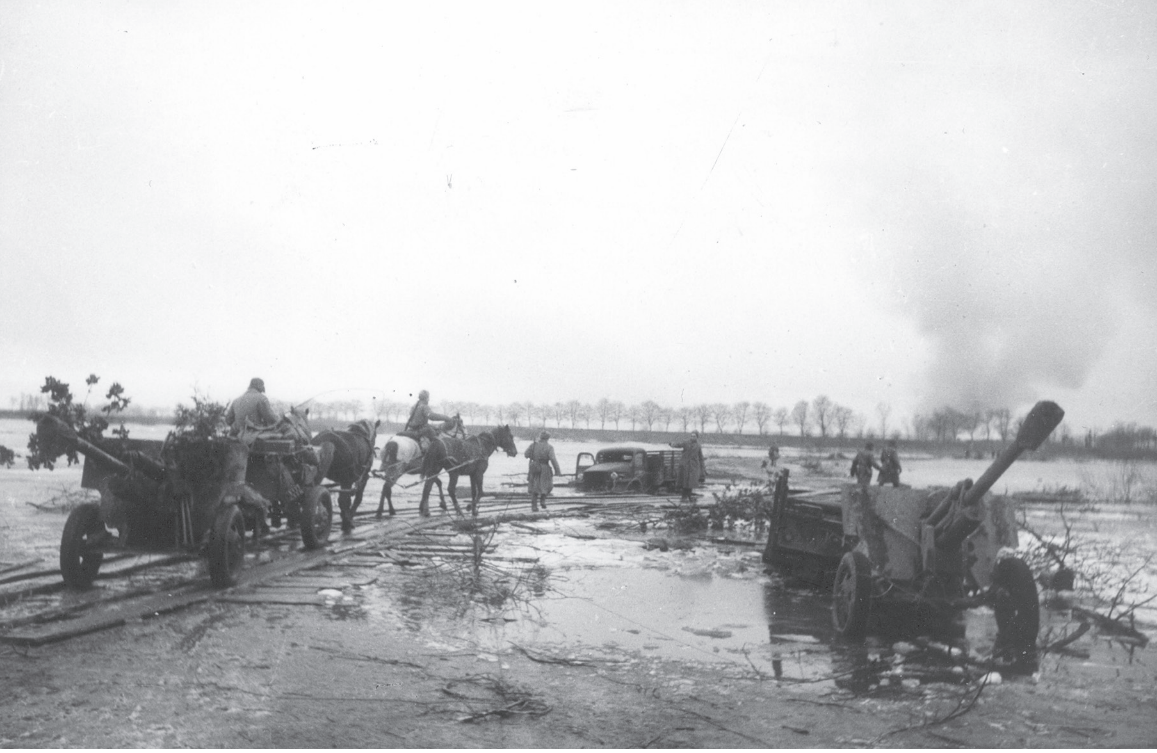
Erhard Raus, commander of Fourth Panzer Army, then First Panzer Army, then Third Panzer Army. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images)

L–R: Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Soviet Armed Forces; Alexander Nikolaevich Bogolyubov, chief of staff of 1st Ukrainian Front; and Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin, commander of 1st Ukrainian Front. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

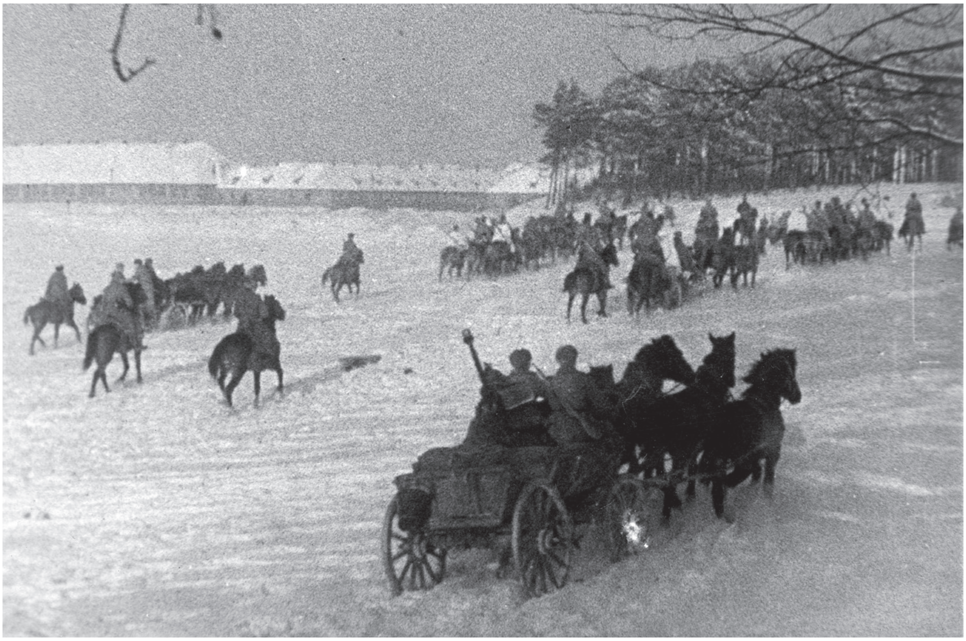
Ivan Stepanovich Konev, commander of 2nd Ukrainian Front. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky, commander of 3rd Ukrainian Front. (Photo by Sovfoto/ Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin, commander of 4th Ukrainian Front. (Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

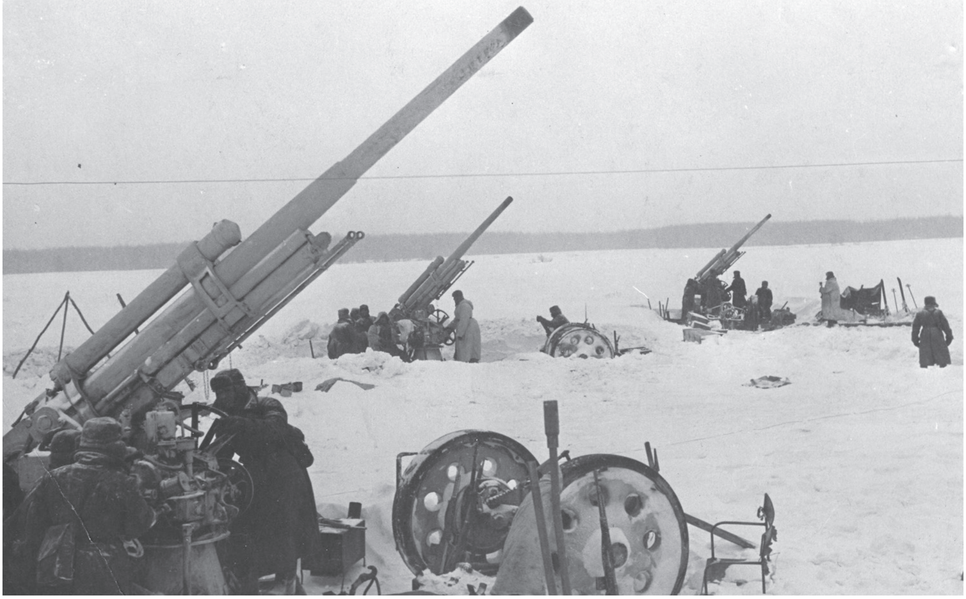


A Soviet river crossing point during the spring thaw. The problems at this time of year are obvious. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)



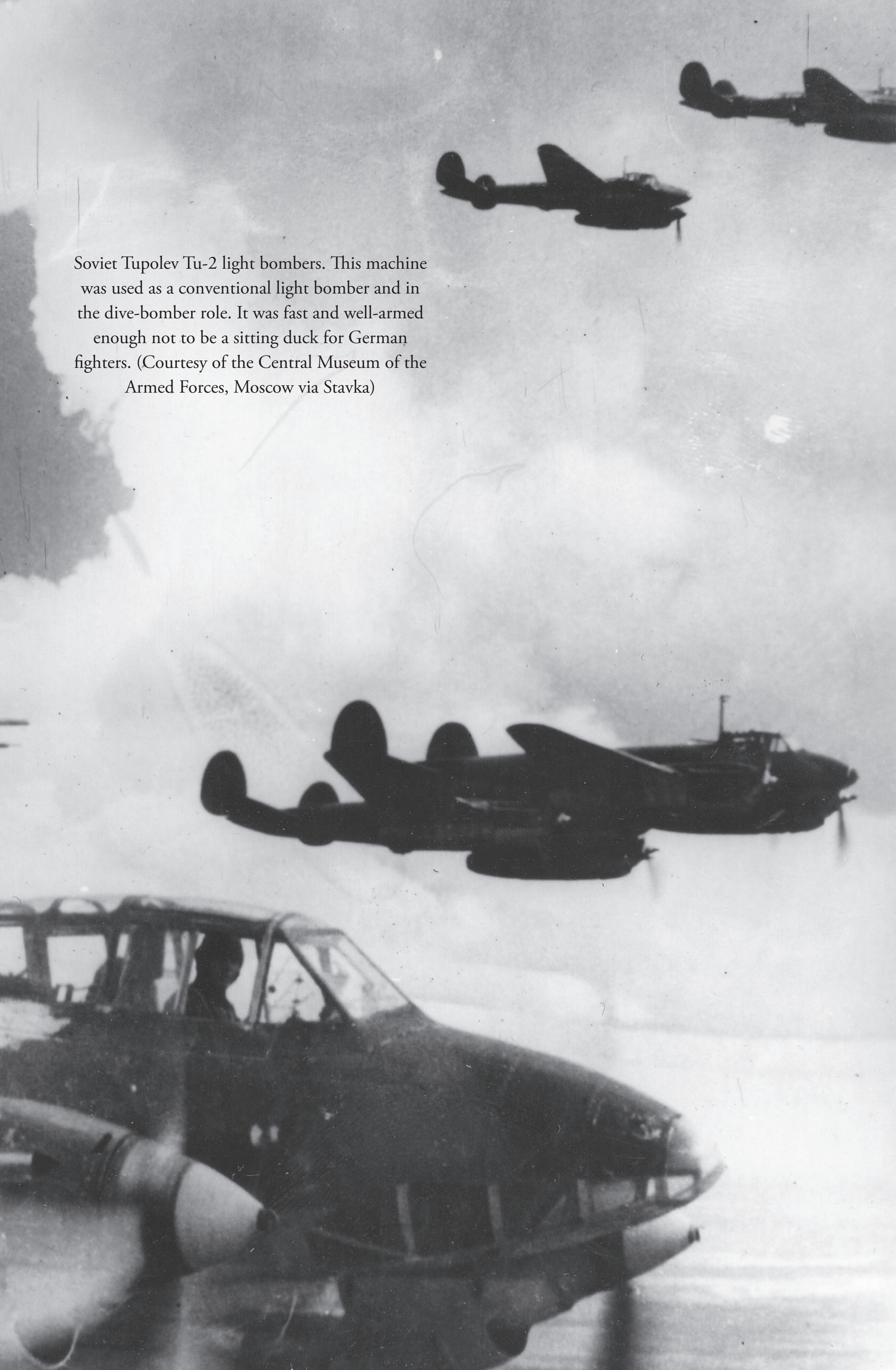
A *tachanka* mobile machine-gun unit in snowy conditions. These vehicles followed cavalry units to provide extra firepower. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)

German troops, stragglers, attacking a Soviet supply unit. Such events were very common, and considerable Red Army resources were tied up securing the ever-extending supply chain. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

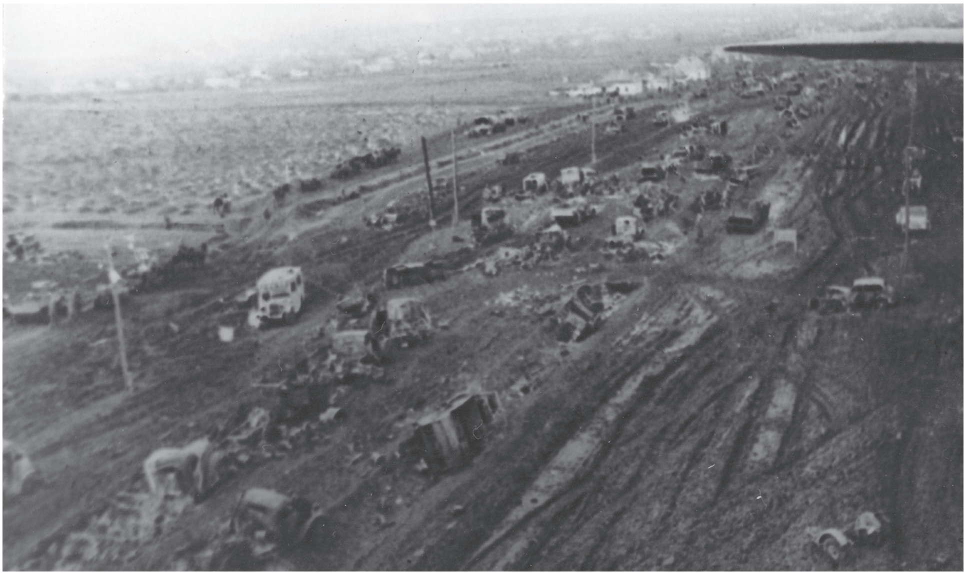


A Soviet M1935 76mm gun deployed to shoot down Axis supply aircraft. Very similar to the legendary German ‘88’, it was based on a German design. It also had good anti-tank capability. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

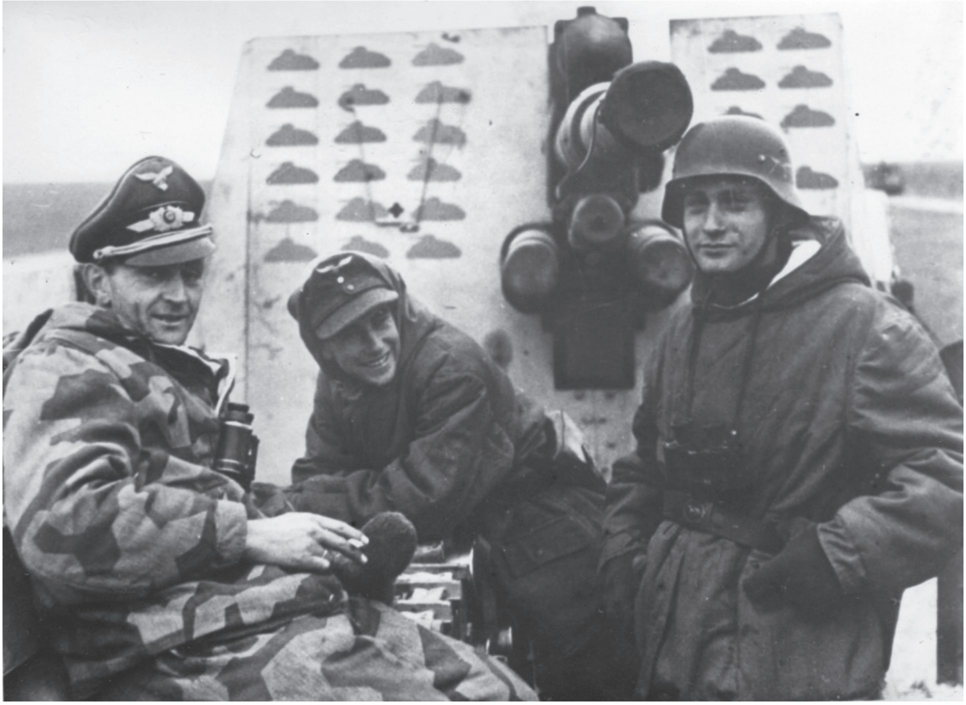
OPPOSITE An SS officer negotiates a flooded trench in conditions that are typical of the muddy time before spring on the Eastern Front. His white camouflage coat is beginning to suffer from the filth. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



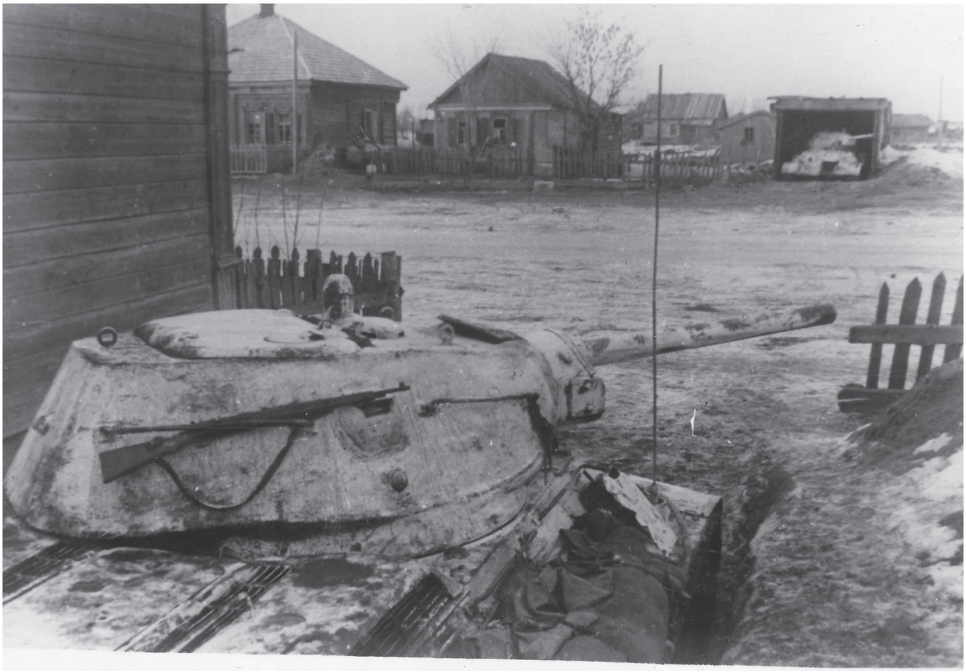
Soviet Tupolev Tu-2 light bombers. This machine was used as a conventional light bomber and in the dive-bomber role. It was fast and well-armed enough not to be a sitting duck for German fighters. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)



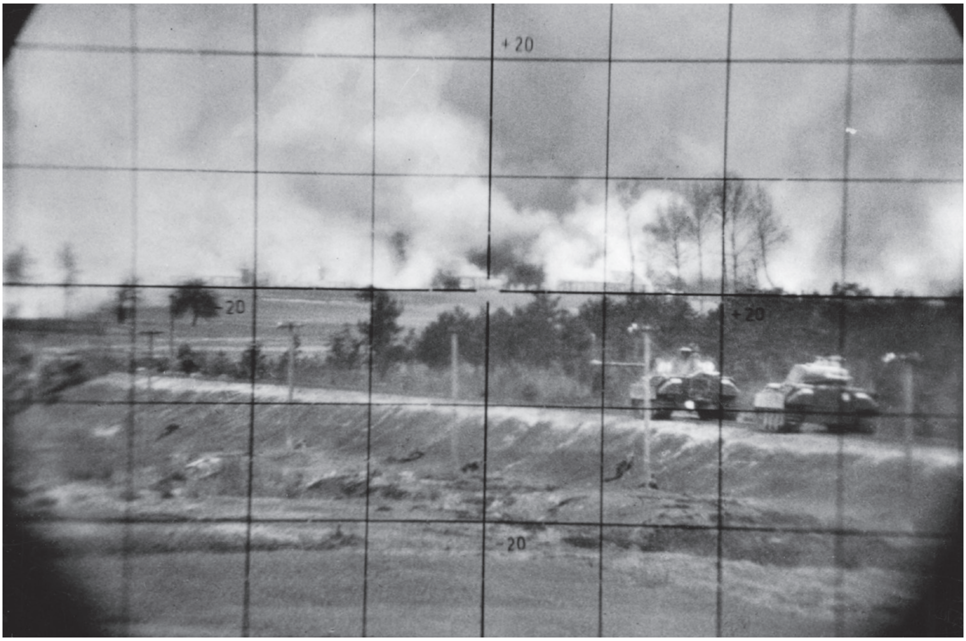
Army Group South lost a colossal amount of equipment during the retreat through western Ukraine. This Axis column looks as if it had been almost immobilised by sodden, muddy going when the Soviet air strike hit it. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)



The successful Luftwaffe crew of an 88mm anti-aircraft gun show off their tally. They had accounted for at least 25 tanks or armoured vehicles. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



A pair of early model T-34s wait in ambush for isolated German troops. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)

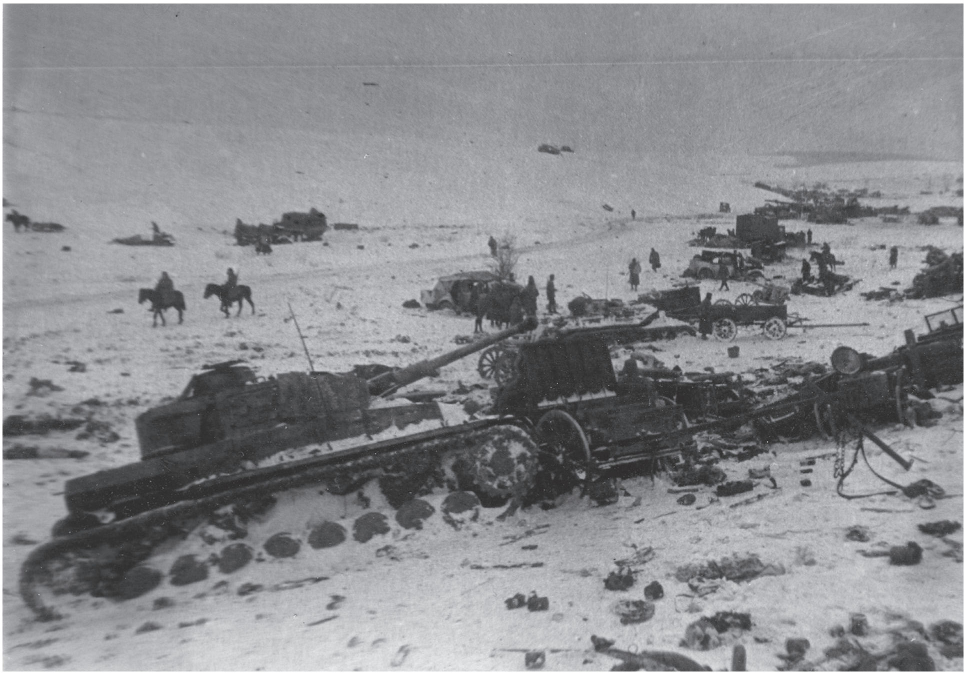


A remarkable image of two Panthers in action, taken through the gunsight of another German tank. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

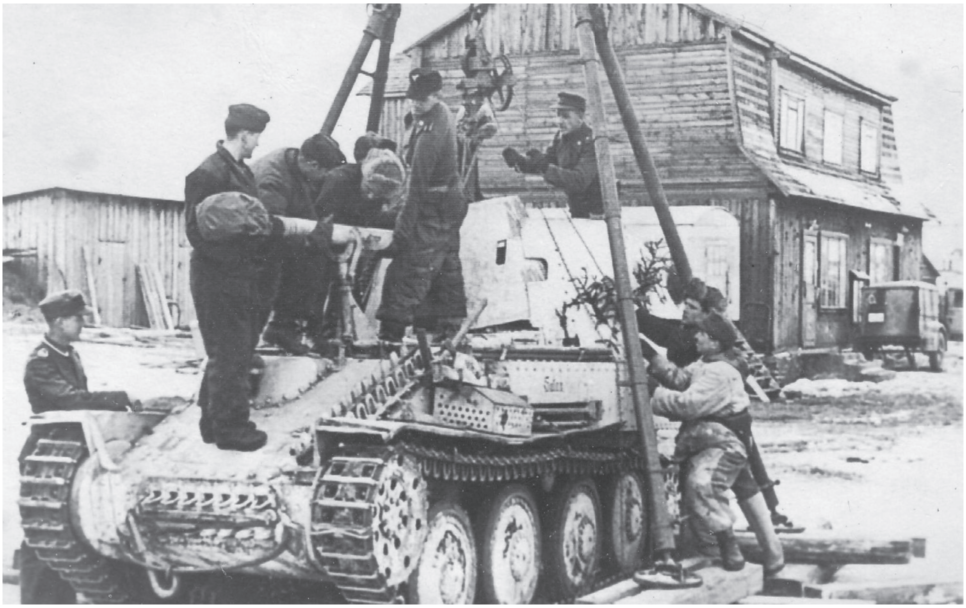
Red Army scouts move cautiously into a village in the Korsun pocket. Bitter fighting raged in this sector in February 1944 as the Soviets sought to prevent a German breakout. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

This panzer unit is setting up its radio net prior to calling in a Stuka strike. The Germans were still able to call in localised air support for counterattacks and breakthrough attempts in 1944 due to the efficiency of their ground-to-air communications. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

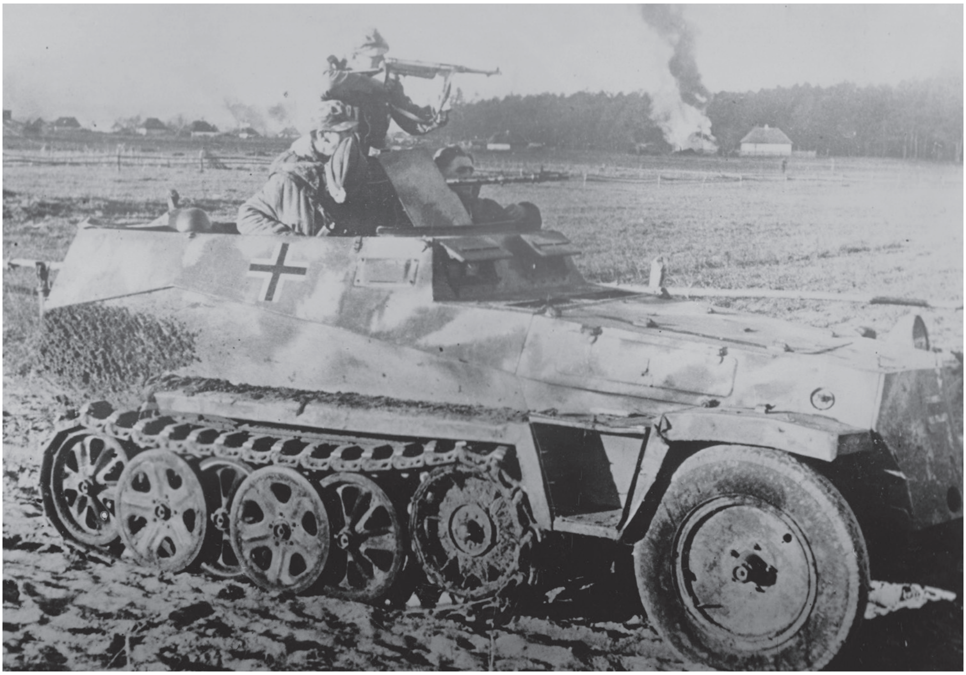
This busy photo shows German soldiers who have escaped from an encirclement being driven to the rear. Exhausted, hungry and filthy, these men are in dire need of recuperation. However, the speed of the Soviet advance would not guarantee any rest. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



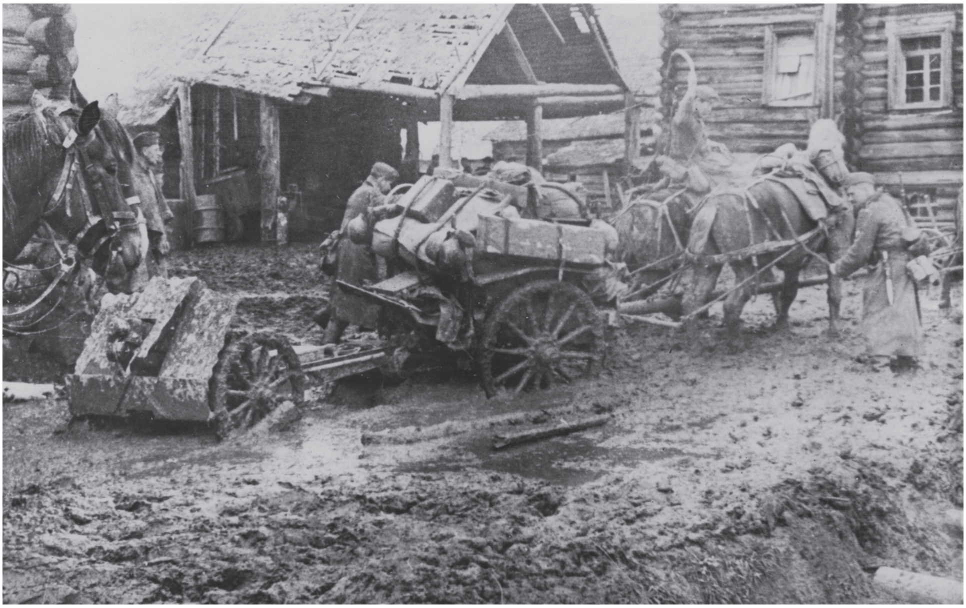
Soviet troops, including cavalry, search through abandoned and wrecked German equipment in the Korsun pocket. Recycling anything useful was a common practice. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)



The repair of armoured vehicles was vital for the Germans as their losses far outstripped replacements and production. Furthermore, as depots were overrun, equipment that could otherwise have been repaired had to be abandoned, further depleting the panzer formations. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



An extraordinary image of a German halftrack, Sd.Kfz 250/1, the crew of which is *Waffen-SS* (possibly the 10th SS Panzer Division Frundsberg), rounding up Soviet stragglers around the Kamanets-Podolski pocket. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



German light artillery in Kovel. Throughout the war on the Eastern Front, most German artillery was horse-drawn. Both sides struggled with road conditions, especially during the spring thaw. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

A nicely posed image of a Soviet cavalry charge – note the waving swords. Mounted troops could cover ground, provide reconnaissance, escort POWs and operate in areas where vehicle maintenance would have proved difficult if not impossible. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)

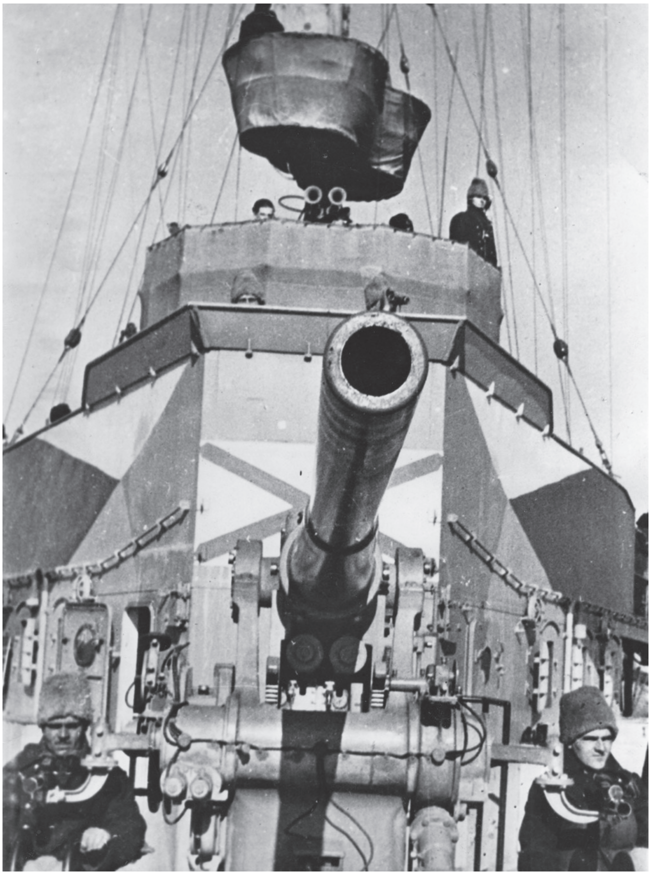
Manning an MG 34 mounted on a tripod in defence mode, the men of a German outpost stare into the woods ahead of them. Night was the testing time for the nerves of soldiers in such a position, however well-armed. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

A Soviet infantry attack. The men are wearing winter kit, including thick, padded boots. In the main they are armed with PPSh-41 submachine guns, but the man to the rear nearest to the camera has a German MP 40, which was very popular with Soviet troops. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

A German forward position. Artillery spotters or Luftwaffe liaison officers, with infantry cover, collect data on Soviet positions. They are not wearing steel helmets, as that provided too 'clean' a profile for keen-eyed sentries. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

A Soviet infantry attack in Crimea. Artillery support is close up, and in the middle distance a mortar crew is in action. Several anti-tank rifles provide sniper fire. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

Germans driving through the ruins of Sevastopol. Hitler had hoped to emulate the Red Army's long defence of the city, but with its defences in ruins such an outcome was a fantasy. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)



A Romanian warship, one of the vessels allocated to the Crimean evacuation. This operation was the largest undertaken by the Romanian Navy during the war, and its fleet evacuated the majority of the Axis troops saved from Crimea. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

German soldiers defend the oilfields at Ploesti in Romania. Hitler was determined to defend this essential strategic asset from air attack, and large numbers of anti-aircraft guns were deployed there. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)

A display of Axis solidarity for the camera. A Romanian (left) and a Hungarian border guard pose on their border with a view of the anti-tank defences. The two nations were less than eager allies for historical, territorial reasons. When Romania switched sides later in 1944, their armies fought one another with little or no compunction. (Nik Cornish at www.Stavka.org.uk)